HOKKAIDO: BEYOND THE POWDER PARADISE

BACKCOUNTRY

THE UNTRACKED EXPERIENCE

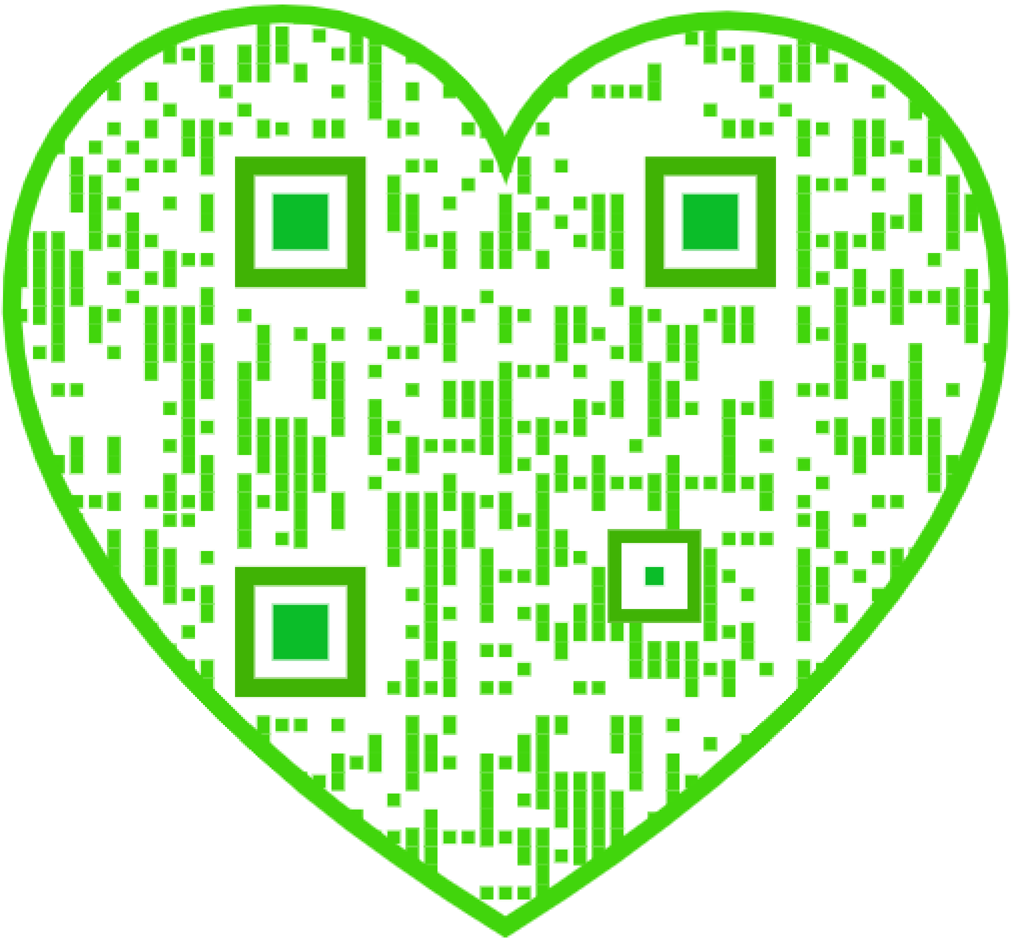
THE OUTLIERS

TRANGO TOWERS
BIG WALL SKIING

SPLITTING PANGEA
A SUPERCONTINENTAL TRAVERSE

STRATTON MATTESON
FIVE YEARS ON A BIKE

1994-2024



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The Outliers Issue

68 The Trango Tango

In 2023, Christina Lustenberger, Jim Morrison and Nick McNutt made an attempt to ski one of Pakistan's Trango Towers, a well-known objective for alpine climbers, not skiers. It wasn't successful, but it lit a fire, and a year later, Lustenberger and Morrison returned with climber Chantel Astorga. After three months at base camp, they pulled off the impossible with a successful summit and descent of the Great Trango Tower.

78 Ignoring Convenience

According to environmental activist Robin Greenfield, "We need extreme people because, it's just a simple fact, if nobody takes it to the extreme, then we never see that we can go to a further possibility." In the ski world, no one better embodies that than Stratton Matteson, a professional splitboarder who spent five years forsaking gas-guzzling vehicles for a bike and pedaling upwards of 40 miles a day to trailheads around his Oregon home.

88 Contours: Hokkaido

When considering the perfect powder, endless supply of ramen and healing onsens, it's obvious why Japan's northern island is a bucket-list item for skiers. But, beyond the low-density flakes and hot springs, there's a deep history of sliding on snow, starting with the indigenous Ainu people's fur-lined birch skis and continuing with an Austrian military man, thriving university outdoor programs and a post-Olympic ski boom.

"This exposed traverse was deemed the ice screw traverse," says Jim Morrison. Christina Lustenberger carefully leads the team across a snowy ridge en route to ski Pakistan's Great Trango Tower. **Courtesy The North Face**

You don't always have to travel far to find the goods. On this particular day, "Every slope seemed to call our name," says Guy Fattal. Once Fattal and Chad Sayers picked their spot, "The sun finally reemerged, setting off an incredible sparkle show as the flurries settled. I grabbed my camera in a hurry, and Chad delivered the magic." **Guy Fattal**

DEPARTMENTS

14 Perspective
Mark Abma finds birthday pow.

17 Editor's Note
Betsy Manero is addicted to caffeine.

18 Letters

20 Off Grid
The *Backcountry* community shares their untracked experience.

24 Spectacle

35 Straight Lines
Ryan Stuart reminds us not to blindly follow social media, and Brody Leven faces binding failure and a midlife crisis in Tajikistan.

42 Blown In: Splitting Pangea
Seth Beck is on a mission to splitboard the remnants of the historic Central Pangean Mountain Range.

48 Blown In: Hut, Hut? Take a Hike
Washington's Cascades are known for their sea of difficult-to-access peaks. And yet, there are hardly any huts available to backcountry skiers within the range.

52 Blown In: State of the Snowpack
State of the Snowpack is bridging the gap between broad Avalanche Canada forecasting zones and local snowpack variability in B.C.'s mountain towns.

56 Blown In: Tracks of Change
Paula Smith, through her organization, the Washoe Youth Outdoor Expedition Program, is bringing kids from the reservation into the backcountry.

58 Wisdom: Doug Chabot
For 29 years, Doug Chabot worked as a forecaster for Montana's Gallatin National Forest Avalanche Center. After retiring last year, he shares a few nuggets of wisdom.

62 Mountain Skills: Mountain Town Survival
It's no secret that living in a mountain town breaks the bank. Ethan Daly investigates how ski bums are making it work.

109 Faces: Craig Sheppard
Craig Sheppard is bringing his snow safety expertise—honed in Alberta's Rocky Mountains—to Australia's Mountain Safety Collective.

114 Gearbox: Poles, Skins and Skintrack Accessories
Poles—adjustable and not—skins and all the items to keep you comfortable on the uptrack.

118 Tailgate: Beach Day Gear

121 Biff America
Live fast. Don't die young.

Gregory Scruggs is a Seattle-based journalist who loves a good backcountry overnighter, stinky sock aroma and all, and yearns for a few more places to sleep comfortably in the Cascades. In this issue he explores why building a backcountry hut in Washington is such an uphill slog (p. 48).

Intern **Kira Corasanti** grew up in New York's Adirondacks where she developed a love for the outdoors. She's passionate about storytelling, social justice and outdoor communities. On p. 68, she shares the story of a thrilling first descent on Pakistan's Great Trango Tower. When not writing, she's slurping Go-Go Squeeze on the skintrack or dancing around on her skis.

Tom Hallberg likes biking, splitboarding in the Cascades and advocating for environmentally sustainable practices. He also enjoys writing profiles and the process of understanding what makes another person tick. Those interests drew him to write about Stratton Matteson, a bike-to-board enthusiast who proves you don't need fossil fuels to splitboard 100 days a year (p. 78).

Editor in Chief **Betsy Manero** first came to *Backcountry* as an intern in 2013 and then went on to work as a ski guide before returning in 2020. She's mostly managed to stay off this contributor page, but in this issue, her coworkers pressured her to submit a bio to go with the 9,000-word story she wrote on the history of skiing in Hokkaido (p. 88).

Mary McIntyre is a photographer, journalist and creator who started exploring the backcountry before she could walk. She spent over a decade traveling the Himalaya, Andes, Arctic and many places in between before chronic illness altered her approach to life and work. On p. 105 she shares one of her adventures to Japan's Rishiri Island.

ON THE COVER

Often, a great photo takes a vision, careful planning and a lot of patience. When conditions and lighting align, the skier and photographer must work in harmony to get it all just right. "I had to wait for hours to get this shot because we wanted to make sure that the shadows would fill half of the frame," says Christoph Oberschneider. Eventually, on this day in Gastein, Austria, the sun did its part, casting partial light over this slope, while darkness loomed in its absence. Lorenz Pfeffel picked his line between the two, gracefully arcing a turn as Oberschneider released his shutter. ▣ **Christoph Oberschneider**

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Editor in Chief | Betsy Manero (betsy@backcountrymagazine.com)
Art Director | Mike Lorenz (mlorenz@backcountrymagazine.com)
Designer | Karianne Shetter (karianne@backcountrymagazine.com)
Managing Editor | Greta Close (greta@backcountrymagazine.com)
Associate Editor | Liam McGee (liam@holpublications.com)
Senior Editors | Craig Dostie, John Dostal
Rider in Chief | Drew Zieff
Editors at Large | Jeff Burke, Tyler Cohen, Megan Michelson
Technical Editor | Lance Riek
Interns | Kira Corasanti, Ethan Daly

Contributing Writers | Jeffrey Bergeron, Tom Hallberg, Heather Hansman Carolyn Highland, Kevin Hjertaas, Mike Horn, Brigid Mander, Mary McIntyre Andrew McLean, Devon O'Neil, Drew Pogge, Ryan Stuart

Senior Photographers | Jay Beyer, Adam Clark, Lee Cohen, Jason Hummel Oskar Enander, Mattias Fredriksson, Grant Gunderson, Matt Kiedaisch Iz La Motte, Fredrik Marmsater, Bruno Long, Ming Poon

Contributing Photographers | Louis Arevalo, Adam Barker, Chris Bezamat Chris Christie, Ryan Creary, Jeff Cricco, Jay Dash, Liam Doran, Guy Fattal Mark Fisher, Jay Goodrich, Jim Harris, Ryan Irvin, Christoph Johann Blake Jorgenson, Reuben Krabbe, Steve Lloyd, Scott Markewitz Mary McIntyre, Brian Mohr, Matt Power, Christian Pondella, Tyler Roemer Carl Skoog, Andrew Strain, Dave Trumpore, Sam Watson, Noah Wetzel Colin Wiseman, Adam Ü, Greg Von Doersten

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PUBLICATIONS

Editor & Publisher | Adam Howard (howie@holpublications.com)
Publisher | Justin Reyher (justin@holpublications.com)
Associate Publisher | Paul Davis (paul@holpublications.com)
CFO | Karen Huard (karen@holpublications.com)
Business Manager | Michele Peoples (michele@holpublications.com)
Subscriptions Manager | Holly Howard (subscriptions@holpublications.com)
Account Executives | Zach Berman (zach@holpublications.com)
Conor Sedmak (conor@holpublications.com)
Events Coordinator | Meg Schultz (meg@holpublications.com)
Social Media Coordinator | Chaney Szeto (chaney@backcountrymagazine.com)
Propellerhead | Duane Howard

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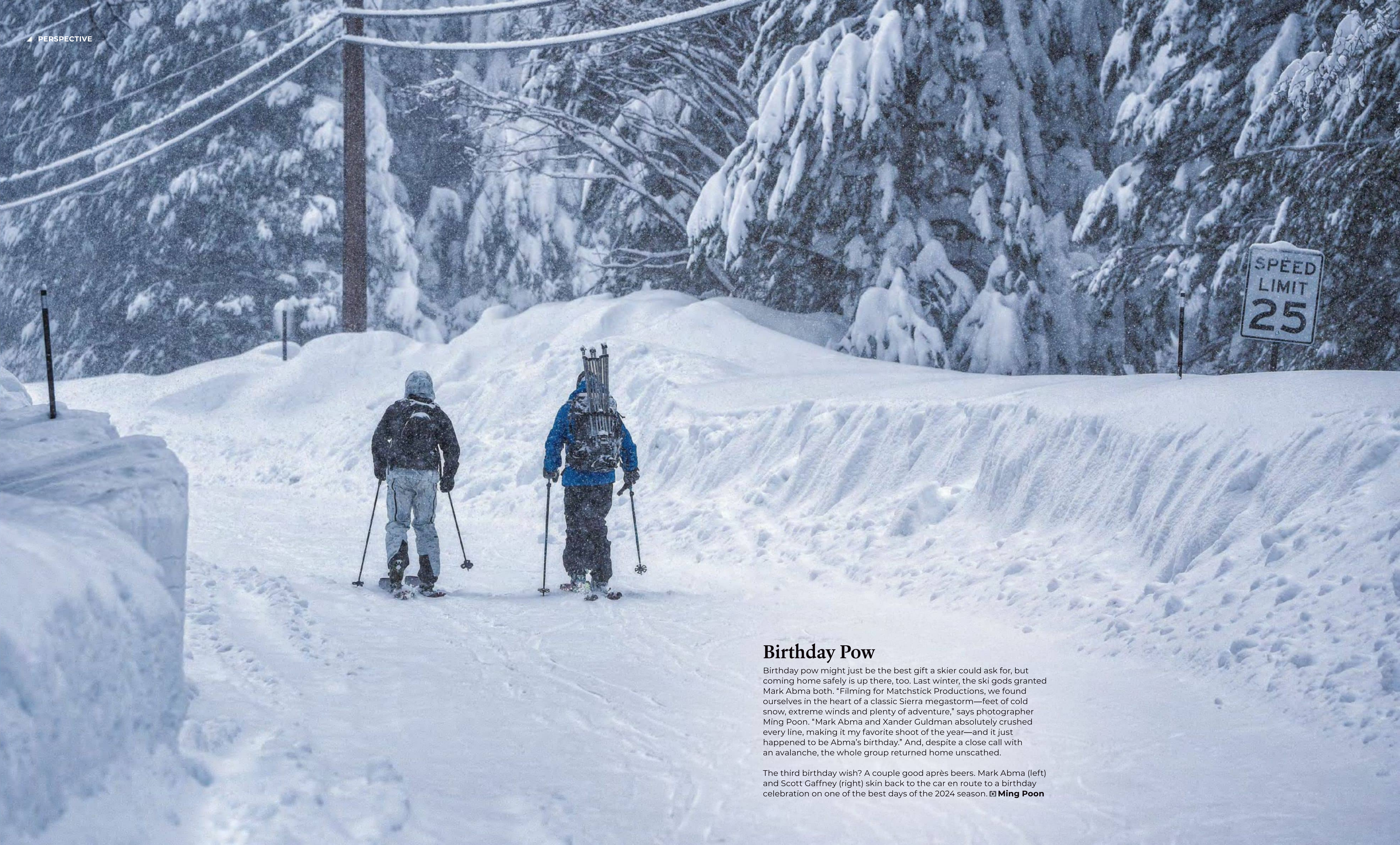

Birthday Pow

Birthday pow might just be the best gift a skier could ask for, but coming home safely is up there, too. Last winter, the ski gods granted Mark Abma both. “Filming for Matchstick Productions, we found ourselves in the heart of a classic Sierra megastorm—feet of cold snow, extreme winds and plenty of adventure,” says photographer Ming Poon. “Mark Abma and Xander Guldman absolutely crushed every line, making it my favorite shoot of the year—and it just happened to be Abma’s birthday.” And, despite a close call with an avalanche, the whole group returned home unscathed.

The third birthday wish? A couple good après beers. Mark Abma (left) and Scott Gaffney (right) skin back to the car en route to a birthday celebration on one of the best days of the 2024 season. **Ming Poon**

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Addictive Personality

"**Betsy, did you pack the coffee?"** Katie asks me as she digs through the yurt's food bin. A rainbow of Gore-Tex, PrimaLoft and Intuition liners hangs above a pellet stove. Nick, Katie's boyfriend, flips through an old issue of *Backcountry Magazine* at the table while my boyfriend, Mike, and I are lounging on the bottom of one of the two metal bunk beds.

We're spending three nights on the west slopes of the Teton Range in the Teton Canyon Yurt, 3,000 feet below the southern border of Grand Targhee Resort. Despite dragging in 20 pounds of food, we forgot the most crucial piece: a 1-pound bag of medium roast.

"I don't think that was on my list," I say.

But Mike rats me out. "We left it on our counter," he announces. What he's really saying is, "You left it on the counter."

Katie and I go through our teas: chamomile and honey lavender. No caffeine. Same goes for the Honey Stinger chews. We have a total of 0 milligrams of caffeine in this yurt.

The last time I didn't have coffee was in Japan while researching the story on p. 88. It ended with me losing my passport. Twice. Before that, there was the time I accidentally drank decaf and went to the emergency room. I'm not alone in my coffee addiction. As a guide, my boss once paid me $300 to carry a pound of coffee 7 miles and 4,000 vertical feet into Grand Teton National Park. It turns out mountain guides and journalists alike are dependent on that caffeine-induced rush of dopamine to start their day.

When we wake up, there's a breakable crust around the yurt. Usually, this would lead to a slow morning making pour over around the woodstove.

"We could go get it and then ski down from Targhee," Nick proposes over a hot chocolate. The extra sugar isn't adequately replacing the roasted bean's buzz. We all agree to skin the 3.5 miles back to the trailhead, drive 7 miles to town and take the resort shuttle. From the top of Targhee, it's a straight shot down to the yurt. Easy, right?

My caffeine headache starts on the skintrack and continues despite a stop at the local coffee shop. Denied of my favorite chemical for too long, my blood vessels are dilating, leading to pressure around the nerves in my brain.

We find out there's no overnight parking at the bus stop, so we park at my house and trudge the half mile with our boots in walk mode. Then the lift that accesses our backcountry gate is broken, leaving us to hustle to a bootpack on the other side of the resort before it closes at 3 p.m. When we finally drop, we rejoice in 1,000 feet of faceshots, only to then navigate through 2,000 feet of that breakable crust. Would we care this much about caffeine if the skiing from the yurt was actually good?

The next morning, the snow buckets outside the door are surprisingly full. Almost 2 feet of low-density powder has fallen overnight. Yesterday's crust is long buried, and we find ourselves saying, "Just one more cup," as we head out to feed the most important addiction of all. —*Betsy Manero*

Betsy Manero fuels her second addiction—powder skiing—above Wyoming's Teton Canyon Yurt. ◘ **Katie Cooney**

Bombs Away

It's Time to Lay Off the Booze

I'm not quite sure why each and every issue of your magazine has to make reference in some manner to beer and alcohol. I truly fail to see the connection between drinking and backcountry skiing. In fact, we ALL know that alcohol dulls one's responses, is addictive, expensive, effects one's performance at altitude and hampers one's recovery from a long day in the mountains.

Your recent *Photo Annual* dedicated an entire page to Liam McGee's "Bombs Away" in which he describes sitting on the porch of the Goldminer's Daughter Lodge drinking an "Alta Bomb." WOW, that's a great accomplishment! The GMD is not in the backcountry, it is in Alta Ski Area. Once again you folks are glorifying drinking booze. Why is this in your magazine?

Your ski product review issue has a photo of people drinking from shot glasses attached to a ski. Other issues have had photos of people wearing socks with the word "BEER" embroidered on them. Donny Roth's piece on hydration shows someone holding up a few cans of Pabst Blue Ribbon beer, with the caption, "Hydration is important before, during and après skiing." While Roth is not saying you should hydrate with beer, the photo sure does. What kind of example is this? You folks are the mouthpiece for backcountry skiing, not the beer industry. You also ran an article about a skier on Mount Hood. Why did you have to include a photo of him drinking hard liquor? These are but a few references. WHY?

You don't see planetmountain.com reporting on athletes for their drinking, but rather for their amazing athletic feats. Benjamin Vedrines, the French mountain guide who has redefined fast and light in the mountains, is noted for his training, not drinking. We don't see photos of Alex Honnold downing a "cold one" on top of El Cap, do we? If I'm correct *Alpinist* magazine does not resort to this sophomoric coverage.

I think it is time to move beyond this frat-boy mentality. I believe *Backcountry Magazine* has so much more to offer its readership.

This WASTED space should instead be dedicated to articles on avalanche awareness, bios of top guides, skimo racers, ski expeditions and methods of training, not furthering America's addiction to alcohol.

Do you suggest we spend the day skiing in the backcountry then drink beer and drive home?? I hope not. But it sounds that way. It is time for *Backcountry Magazine* to go cold turkey! Now.

I'm pretty sure you will not print this letter. That would take courage. You only seem to print letters of adoration. I would love to hear an explanation as to why you feel including alcohol glorification in your magazine is so necessary.

Thanks,

TOM MAVILIA
TAOS COUNTY, NEW MEXICO

Hi Tom,

We're always happy to have a conversation, whether it's on things we do well, or ways we missed the target. In many ways, you're right. Alcohol is, scientifically, poisoning oneself. It does dull sensations and limit our ability to think critically—both things we value deeply and are important for decision making in the backcountry. However, there is still an après culture to skiing and we want to cover all aspects of the sport. A vast majority (over 132 pages each issue) of the coverage we publish is dedicated to education, guides, exploring, the beauty of wild places and the camaraderie built through long walks in a skintrack. Sometimes, we inject some humor and light-hearted work between those stories. We're of the belief that all subscribers and readers of our magazine are informed, intelligent and can make their own decisions regarding each story. We're glad you brought up the issue, and we hope you can enjoy the rest of the magazine, even if it means skipping a page or two (maybe p. 118). We'd encourage you to check out The Avalanche Review *if you're interested in cut and dried science and professional skills write-ups, sans alcohol.* —The Editors

Murses

This letter is in response to the article "Skid Medicine" in Issue 160, The Photo Annual. —The Editors

So I picked up your latest magazine—and couldn't help but notice that only cute blonde lady nurses were represented in your piece on dirtbag skiers who decided on nursing to fund their addiction. Here's my entry for the next edition: Ryan the ICU murse who skis a lot and sometimes cross dresses as my alter ego Leslie aka Lesslayyy.

RYAN MILLING
MISSOULA, MONTANA

Corrections:
On p. 50 in *The 30th Anniversary Issue*, we miscredited Lucas Herbet's photo on the bottom p. 51. Sorry about that, Lucas!

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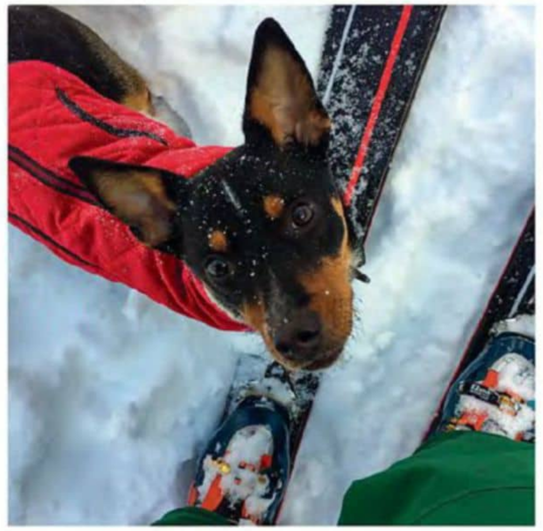
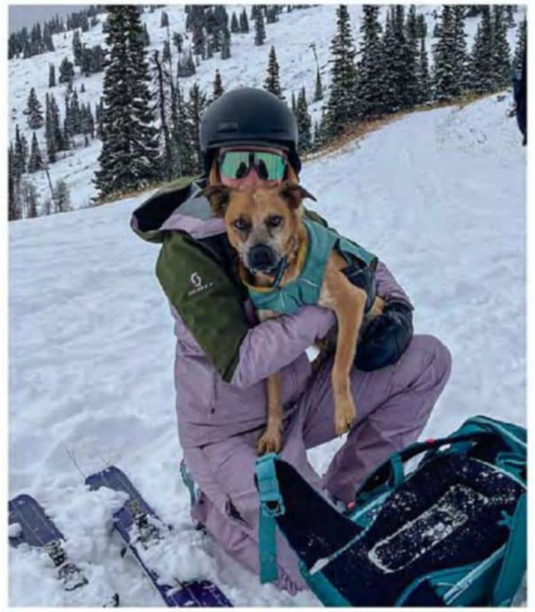
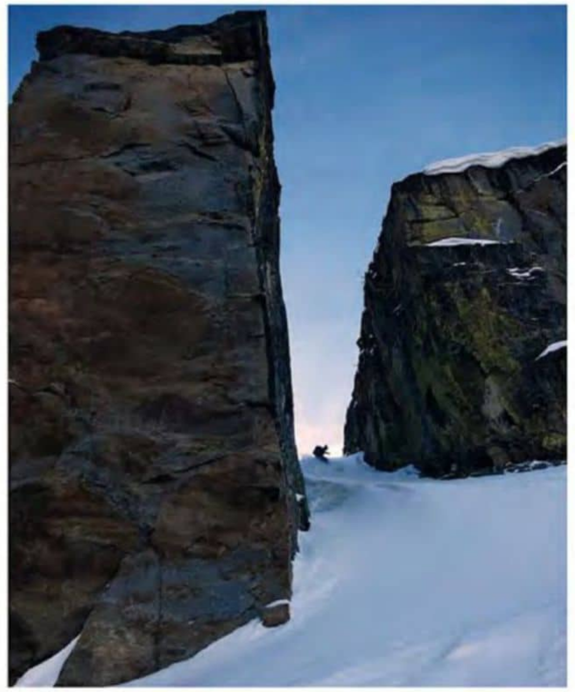
We think community is at the heart of backcountry skiing, so we want to know, in one picture what's the untracked experience to you? Email your photo submissions to photo@backcountrymagazine.com with the subject line "Off Grid" for a chance to be featured.







Thank you for Submitting: Mike Traslin, Andy Traslin, Spencer Dillon Reed Kennedy, Lee House, Chaney Szeto, Stuart Carr, Albert Mandell Betsy Manero, Mike Lorenz, Grace Drummond, Lauren Powers

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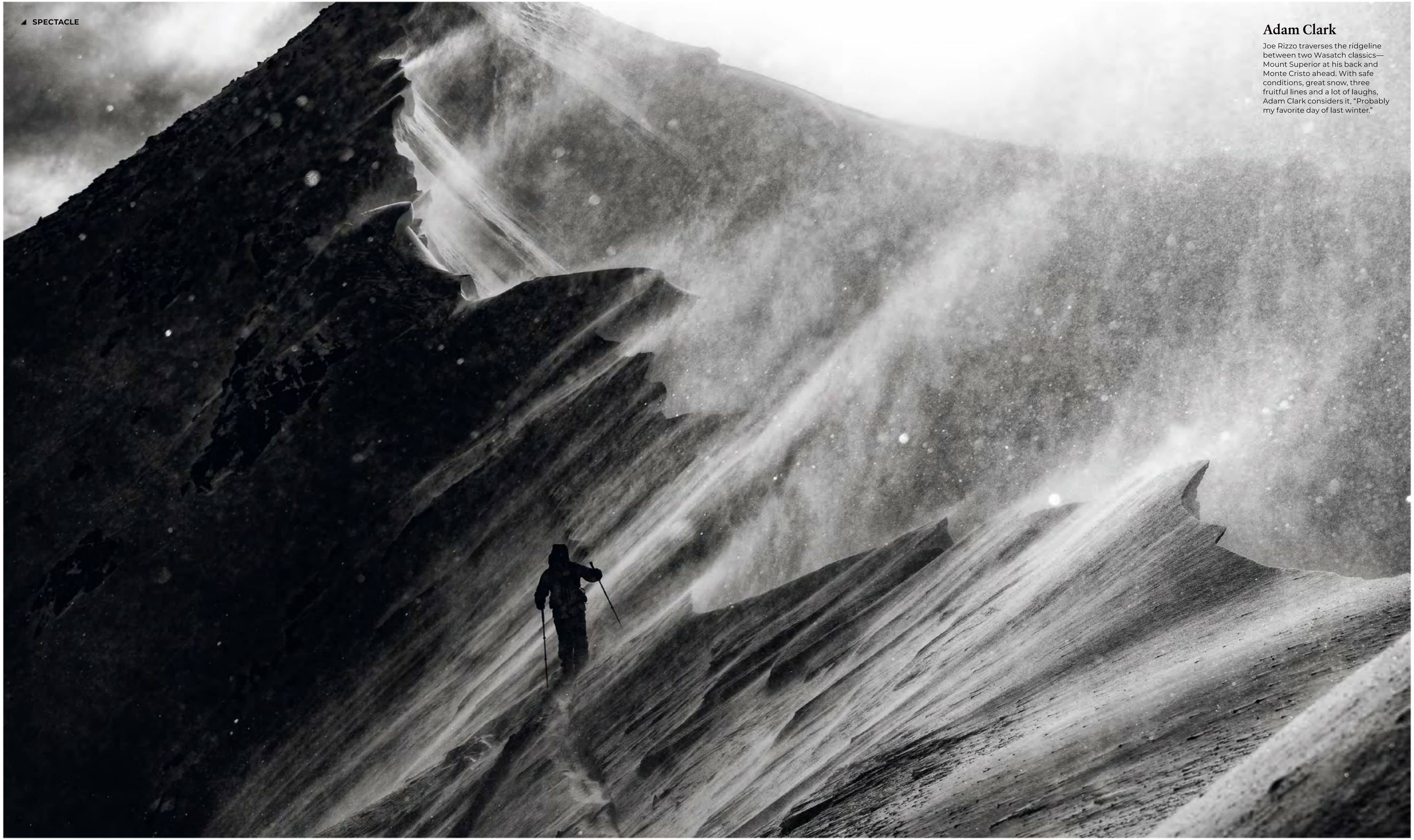
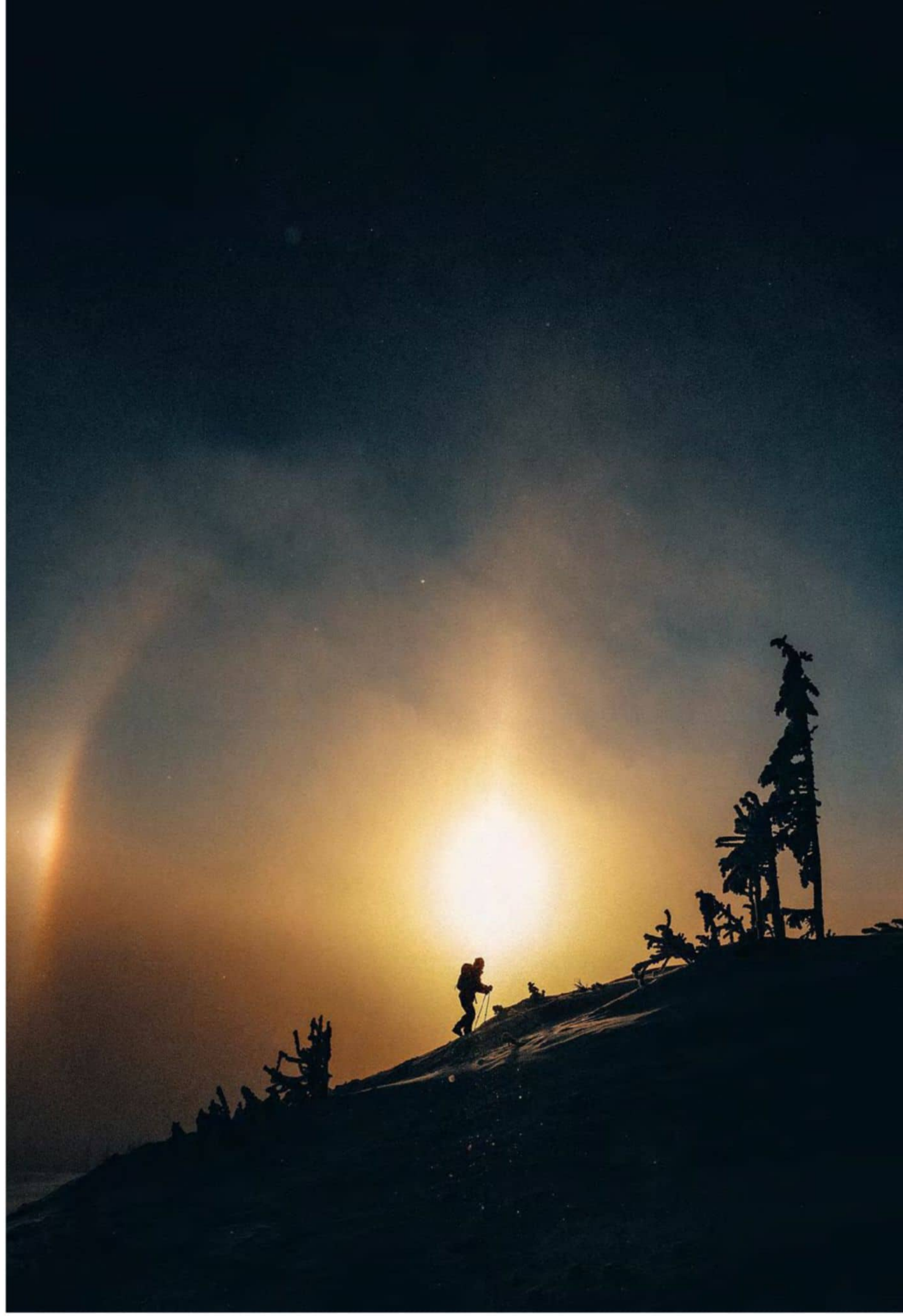


Adam Clark

Joe Rizzo traverses the ridgeline between two Wasatch classics—Mount Superior at his back and Monte Cristo ahead. With safe conditions, great snow, three fruitful lines and a lot of laughs, Adam Clark considers it, “Probably my favorite day of last winter.”



Jay Beyer

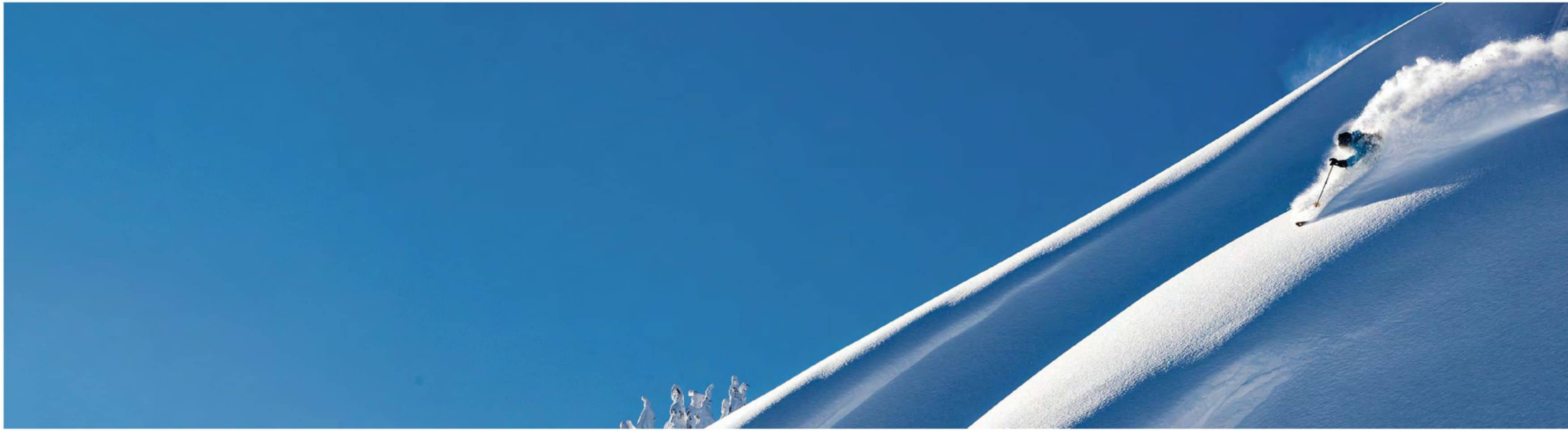
As the age old saying goes, early bird gets the worm. Or, in this Wasatch case, Carston Oliver gets the untracked, sunrise pow.

Sofia Wester

On a cold, early morning in Åre, Sweden, Jacob Wester passes through a halo of light and ice crystals.

Noah Wallace

With headlamps cutting through the starless Canadian night, Emily Childs and Chris Rubens traipse through falling snow.



Grant Gunderson

Last year the Pacific Northwest experienced an uncharacteristically dry season. On this rare powder day, Grant Gunderson and Zack Giffin rose at 4 a.m. to capture the sunrise. "We continued skiing glorious blower snow the rest of the day," says Gunderson.

Fredrik Marmsater

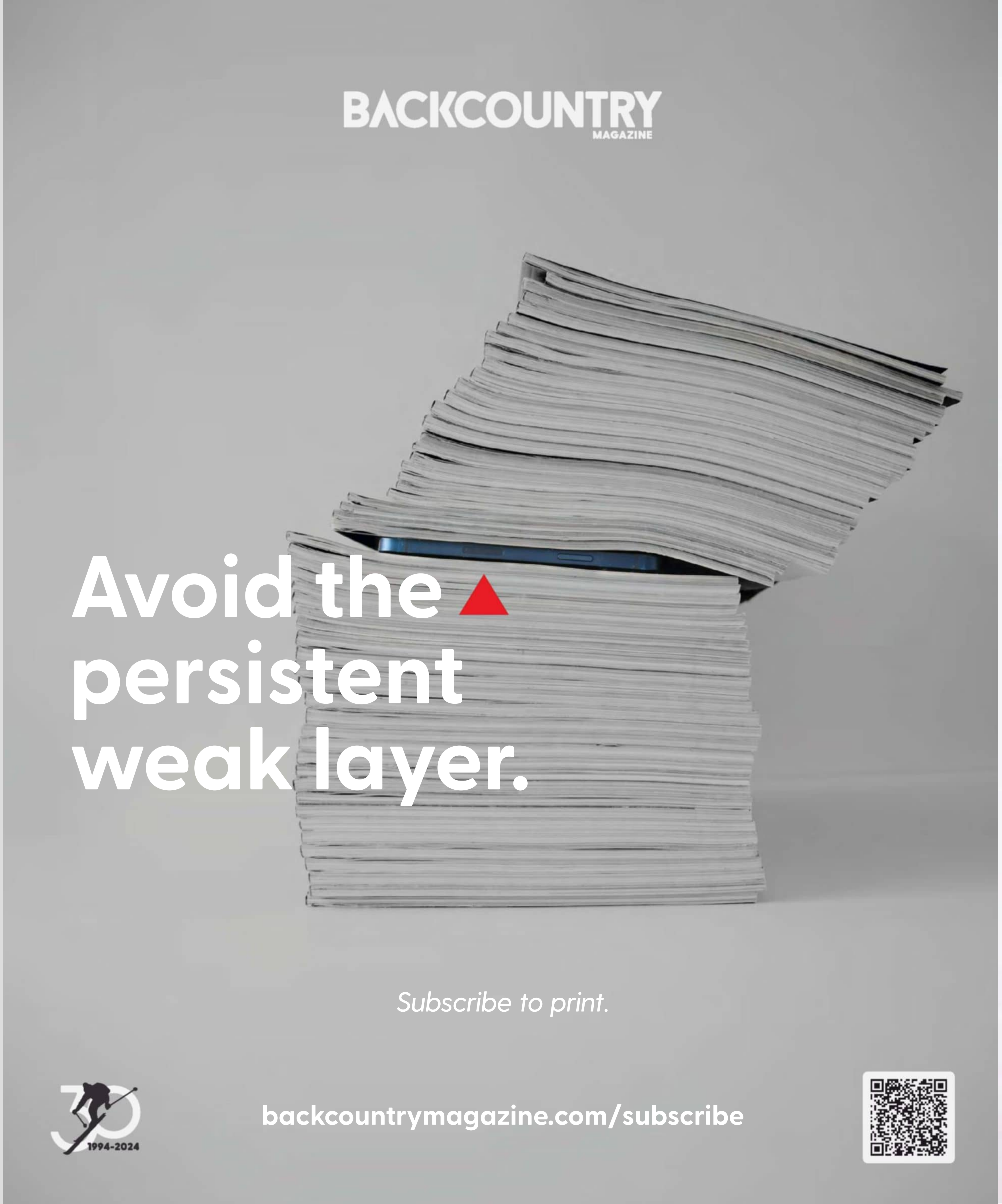
On sabbatical from Colorado hardslab, Eric Poore enjoys the midwinter goods in a Teton couloir.

Oskar Enander

Jim Ryan hit the sweet spot when he headed to Engelberg, Switzerland, to visit Marcus Caston last winter. Turns out he had good chemistry with Oskar Enander, too. Meeting for the first time, says Enander, "We got a bunch of free laps in the morning, shot in the afternoon and that was it. One and done."

Jeff Cricco

In early morning light, San Juan Expeditions guide Kam Weakley dances between shadows and soft snow in the northern San Juan mountains.



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How Not to Go Viral

by Ryan Stuart

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At first Matt Randall's skiing is solid enough that I almost forget he's about to take a terrifying 1,000-foot fall. His GoPro footage shows him nail a couple solid jump turns as he negotiates the summit ridge of South Maroon Bell, one of Colorado's 14,000-foot peaks. Then he catches his tip on a rock and spins backwards.

I may be at my desk in a warm house thousands of miles from Colorado, but the adrenaline pumps through me like I'm the one tomahawking down the mountain.

My Instagram feed is full of videos like this one, and I can't help watching them, thanks to a combination of morbid curiosity and knowing that it could have been me. I've accidentally skied off cliffs, tumbled down gnarly backcountry faces or been one lazy step away from something bad. Most of the time I've never known how close I came.

I think that's true of a lot of backcountry skiers. We're very aware of avalanche risk but we can be more ignorant of other mountain hazards. According to my algorithm, they're tripping us up all the time.

Take the YouTube short of two skiers bootpacking along a narrow alpine ridge. They're doing a lot right: Their skis are securely racked on their packs, ice axes are out, and they're taking care to gingerly place their cramponed boots. Suddenly, the cornice cracks, splitting the ridge right beneath the leader's feet. Luckily, as he falls, he maneuvers himself just enough to hang onto the edge.

"Cornices are a scary phenomenon that present a huge amount of uncertainty," says Zeb Blais, the founder and head guide for Blackbird Mountain Guides, which runs ski trips in California, Washington and beyond. "I treat them as guilty until proven innocent."

Any fresh snow or wind, warming temperatures or solar heating means Blais will be giving a cornice even more space. Only if the cornice is well established and not overhanging too far will he consider getting close to the edge. In the terrain from the YouTube video, Blais says he would have traversed the ridge far below the crest to climbers' right and might have used a belay.

Then, there's dropping into terrain that lies below a cornice. Ruedi Beglinger, lifelong guide and founder of B.C.'s Selkirk Mountain Experience, only skis below cornices if he can get a good look at them from the side. He likes to approach from solid ground, like rocky terrain down ridge, so he can study the cornice's shape, size and condition. If he likes what he sees, he skis in from one edge, never off the middle. "I always expect them to collapse and probably further back from the lip than I expect," he says.

Another doom scroll leads me to a point of view (POV) video. The sky is a brilliant shade of blue, and the pilot is skiing a wide-open alpine slope covered in friendly wind-dappled powder. You can't really tell he's on a glacier until he's dodging an oncoming hole. Then, the camera is covered with snow. When it clears, he's sliding down a deep crevasse.

According to Claude Vallier, a backcountry guidebook author and former search and rescue specialist in Chamonix, France, it takes years of observations to understand the nuances of how terrain impacts glacier ice and what that looks like on the surface. Warning signs are any open areas, as well as random flat spots, dips in the middle of slopes or subtle shifts in snow color. All should be given wide berths and approached with caution: rope up and use a probe to feel for holes.

Any travel on glaciers should be planned with caution and executed with care. On glaciers, Beglinger says he adds one level of avalanche danger. Vallier never takes both skis off at the same time, even when transitioning from skinning to skiing.

Next, I'm grabbed by a POV shot of a skier on low-angle powder. He banks right and begins following old tracks towards what he must hope is virgin snow. With speed, he cuts below those tracks. There's no time to stop when the snow runs out and the air begins, leading to a 150-foot fall. Thankfully, he cleans the camera afterwards, but his drop is jarring to witness.

It's human nature, says Blais, to see other tracks as comfort and safety and turn off our mountain senses. "People tend to follow tracks blindly," he adds. What the tracks don't tell us is who made them or when. Maybe they lead to disaster, like our skier's tracks do now—he likely didn't go back up to post a warning sign. Maybe conditions have changed since, or maybe there was a safer way.

Last summer, Blais stopped to consider the route many parties had followed across a glacier and saw an alternative with less exposure that also turned out to be more efficient. It was a good reminder to take a moment to look at new terrain, tracked or not, like a blank canvas.

There are plenty of other hazards skiers should take more seriously, says Blais, like being purposeful about where and when we switch from skinning to bootpacking to crampons. He also finds people tend to be oblivious to rockfall, which will likely become a more serious risk as glaciers and snowfields recede, exposing the rocks beneath.

It would be easy to argue that social media might be the biggest hazard of all. Apps bring the exploits of pros and influencers to many eyes, making the backcountry, its big lines and committing climbs seem more benign and accessible. What the videos lack is the backstory of experience and the training that goes with it.

But the algorithm also feeds me a sobering reality: the hazards, mistakes and consequences I would never imagine on my own. All these fail videos are a reminder that the mountains are full of risk. As is, apparently, skiing in front of someone wearing a GoPro.

Senior contributor Ryan Stuart has done plenty of dumb things in the backcountry. Maybe that's why he still doesn't have a TikTok account.

[Top] Does it go? What about with a field-repaired binding? Brody Leven tests his handiwork on Tajikistan's 16,789-foot Pik Energia.

[Below] Leven revisits his journal at the trailhead, reflecting on what he calls one of the strangest mountain experiences of his life.

The Premonition

words and photos by Brody Leven

When Robin Hill and I skin around a feature in Tajikistan's Fann Mountains and see the peak we are here to ski, I'm measured. Half of this glaciated Central Asian country sits over 10,000 feet. At the head of the valley, the 16,798-foot Pik Energia soars skyward. To our knowledge, no one has ever skied off this mountain. Somewhere below its summit, our theoretical line of descent dodges a 1,500-foot cliff before arcing back into the fall line. I don't ponder the axiom, "If I fall there, I die," but instead, "If my binding rips out there, I die."

I first thought about the potential of a binding failure weeks ago while sitting on my basement floor. Equipment covered the drab beige carpet in my windowless gear room. As I prepared for my first expedition since 2020, I reflected on the last four years. My longtime ski partner Robin started a business and had a child. I got married and moved. We're a long way from the first day of college, where we met 18 years—half of our lifetimes—ago. As I sorted repair equipment, what once felt natural felt obscure. I wondered if this might be my last expedition, which too many of our contemporaries have recently taken, purposefully or not.

A spare binding sat among the gear. Having never ripped out a binding, I didn't know if it was even possible to thread a binding into old holes. Glue, maybe? I searched online for single-use epoxy. A five-pack was $22. I'd financially overextended myself to make the trip a reality and needed to draw the line somewhere. I drew it there but packed the spare binding anyway.

On the flight, I couldn't shake the possibility of a failed binding mount. I wrote, "I feel like I don't know how to ski, let alone climb a technical peak to ski over deadly exposure." The years away from giant mountains had taken their mental toll on me. What I refused to write is the daydream of a ski shooting off a cliff without a toepiece. As a severely logical person, I bemoaned my irrational fear. I don't believe in prophecy.

A text from a friend slipped through before we landed: "Don't get beheaded."

Without an official trailhead for Pik Energia, the road ends at a meadow, and we start walking. Robin and I obsess over what gear to

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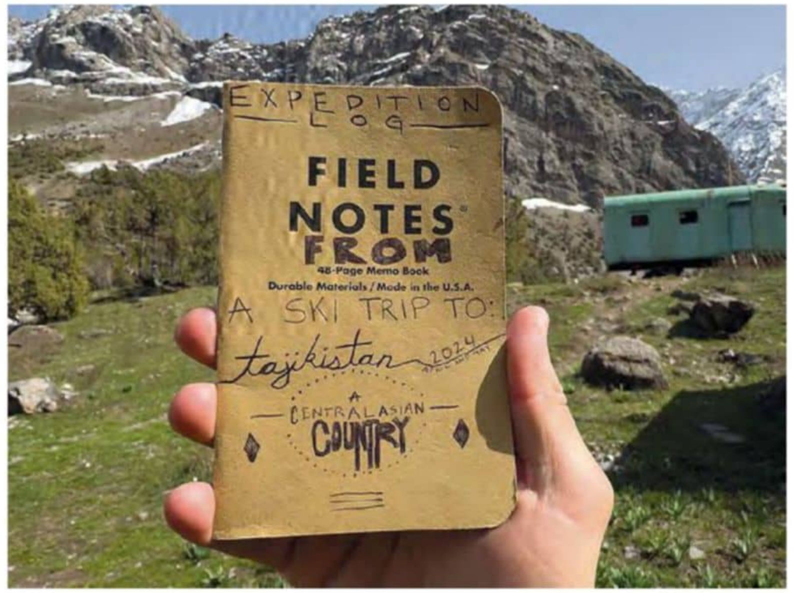


> *I wondered if this might be my last expedition, which too many of our contemporaries have recently taken, purposefully or not.*

[Left] On the trek to Pik Energia, Leven considers what will happen if his binding rips out midturn.

[Right] Leven prepares to move down valley sans one crucial item: a toe piece.

[Facing Page] With Chimtarga's south face as a witness, Robin Hill navigates a zone that is only moderately easier with a rope.

stash at base camp and what to carry higher. Our experience shows, but so does our uncertainty. We know how much fuel to carry but are unsure if the lake is frozen or where to camp. Decisions are made with more experience than information. Miscalculation offers consequences both big and small. The sense of discovery is strong here. When I look up at the peak, I again think about the binding.

Hoping we're beyond the runout zones of neighboring peaks, we camp on the leeward side of a towering boulder above a frozen lake. The elevation is uncomfortable, and the weather is inconsistent, so the tent becomes a prison. I sneeze and can't sleep. Robin coughs and can't stay awake. We're both irritable. Consumed with home life, Robin doesn't leave his sleeping bag for 30 hours. Wondering what I'm doing with my life, my notebook fills, and I obsess over worst-case scenarios.

The weather clears enough for us to start acclimatizing higher. A few thousand feet above camp, the 14,500-foot wind lashes at us. We stash some gear behind a boulder before retreating, bumping along frozen avalanche debris, low angle but miserable. My skis go opposite directions and Robin's snowboard is unforgiving. I'm side-hilling, avoiding the fall line entirely, when I collapse. I'm still tumbling when I see my ejected ski and the holes where my toepiece should be. Instantly, I consider every scenario, my repair kit, how I predicted this and what can be salvaged. But the trip is over. The screaming starts.

Robin thinks I blew my knee. He's calm. I'm bellowing. Clouds approach. The jagged horizon reminds me of being struck by lightning while skiing behind Robin in 2016. We were retreating from a storm on Ordzhonikidze, a 14,468-foot peak in Kazakhstan. I saw an arc between my poles. Our partner on that trip died in an avalanche six months ago. His son was born two weeks ago. Robin is looking at me, worried, because now I'm sobbing.

I'm uninjured, but it's over. We're going home. I ruined everything. I'm apologizing, offering to pay for his trip. I knew this would happen. I manifested it without any reason to believe. The screw holes have exploded alongside my professional skiing career. I hate myself. We limp 3,000 feet to camp.

From his sleeping bag, Robin asks if I can fix my ski. I've never cried like this. I don't know how reliable a remounted binding is when a ski's core is sopping wet, which we discovered through the gaping holes left by a botched binding mount. We satellite message everyone. My wife researches if a wet core is reliable. Six months on, she'll tell me it was the most worried she's ever felt. I tell no one that I somehow knew this would happen yet fail to shake the coincidence. "I was supposed to die today," stays in my mind.

We find a solution with the help of our local fixer and a few days of hiking, but the remounted binding is 3 inches forward, where the ski's core is dryer. It does not inspire confidence. I whittle sticks to seal the existing holes using his imported epoxy—the exact single-use packets that I decided weren't worth $22.

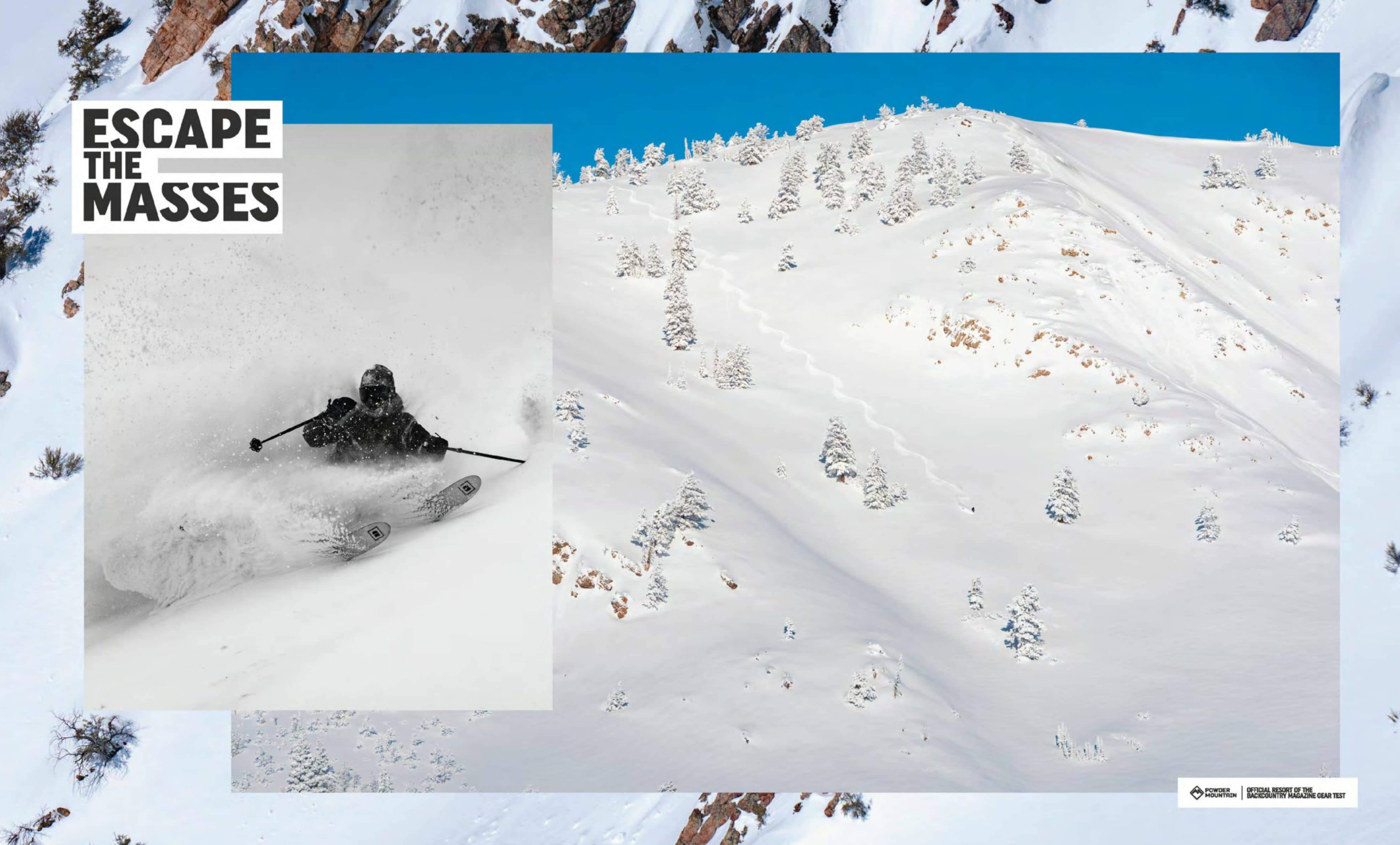
"If my binding rips out above that cliff, I die," is now a rational thought, and I think it three days later when we're back at camp. Why did it happen in benign terrain? Under calm wind, would I have been making turns above that giant cliff instead of retreating through refrozen avalanche debris? Why did I repeatedly envision this?

We want to climb Pik Energia, but instead find ourselves back at 14,500 feet, bailing. My ski is covered in sawdust, sticks and grass. I'm scared to trust it. Short time and thin patience has burned motivation. With severe heat illness and a questionable ski repair, confidence hits an all-time low. But as we retrieve our stashed gear, the sky is clear. We look at each other and choose to climb toward the summit. The north ridge, connecting Pik Energia to the range's highest peak, Chimtarga, completes our ascent.

Though I've never stood here, I've been here. I don't know how to fix a binding—I do know how to get down a technical, unskied face. The summit is tiny and gifts the steepest turns before a 40-meter rappel deposits us on a 52-degree slope. Gingerly, I leave the fall line and make the required turns over the giant cliff. For the first time, I don't obsess over my ski. The descent is 5,400 feet.

We don't even discuss another objective. Dying while pushing my luck even further is indefensible. I look up, knowing I somehow anticipated all this. But I don't believe in that stuff. ❄

Raised in an Ohio family of non-skiers, Brody Leven now works as a professional ski mountaineer and volunteer climate advocate. He lives in Salt Lake City with his dog (Spaghetti) and her mom (his wife).


ESCAPE THE MASSES
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OFFICIAL RESORT OF THE BACKCOUNTRY MAGAZINE GEAR TEST

SPLITTING PANGEA

East Coast splitboarder Seth Beck is on a mission to ski the remnants of an ancient mountain range, starting from his own backyard.

by Jesse Huffman

“I remember that moment clearly,” says Seth Beck about his inaugural 2019 trip to the Tablelands of Newfoundland, a stark landscape that NASA studied as a Mars analogue. “We were at the base of Pic a Tenerife, a shark fin of a mountain that looks like it’s from a Dr. Seuss book. The sun was just starting to peek through the clouds, revealing long, open tree runs, when something our guide, Ryan Crocker, said caught my ear. He was explaining why the terrain was so unique.”

It turns out the Tablelands are one of only a few places in the world where the Earth’s mantle is exposed and pushed through the crust. The stunning formation of gneiss and granite peaks was caused by tectonic plates colliding in the process of creating the supercontinent Pangea. Hundreds of millions of years of erosion has since exposed the mantle.

Crocker told the tale of how Pangea’s formation didn’t just create the Tablelands, but also the mountains of Eastern Canada and the United States. Realizing that the supercontinent connected every place Beck had ridden his splitboard was a bolt of inspiration. An engineer by trade with the soul of an old-school explorer, Beck’s draw to adventure and applied problem solving made him wonder just how far he could take the connection he’d unearthed. Back home in Bristol, Vermont, he put together a plan to tour as many mountain ranges formed by the supercontinent as possible, kicking off what he calls the Pangean Project.

Nothing we’re taught about Pangea in grade-school geology relates to backcountry skiing. But look a little deeper, with the right perspective, and ancient history begins to link inspiring touring destinations. >>

In 1767, Captain James Cook spied a shark-fin mountain from his ship in Bonne Bay along the west coast of Newfoundland. He named this peak Pic a Tenerife. In 2020, Seth Beck and Josh Rawlings carved turns down the same face Cook spotted 250 years ago. **Shem Roose**

[Top Left] Josh Rawlings climbs through the rust-colored rock of the Earth's mantle in western Newfoundland's Tablelands. ⊡ **Shem Roose**

[Facing Page, Bottom] The Central Pangean Mountain Range (highlighted) rings the northern Atlantic Ocean. ⊡ **Karianne Shetter**

[Top Right] Beck gazes past fishing shacks to Gro Morne Mountain, one of many peaks stretching north from Newfoundland. ⊡ **Shem Roose**

[Bottom Right] Local guide Matt Spencely watches over a young Greenlandic girl outside Kulusuk airport. ⊡ **Seth Beck**

Around 320 to 200 million years ago, the Earth's continents collided, and the grinding forces thrust up a mountain range as high as the Himalaya. Running northeast to southwest across the supercontinent, the Central Pangean Mountain Range split what would become the North American continent and Greenland on one side and Africa, the British Isles and Scandinavia on the other.

Over the intervening geological eras, the Central Pangean Mountain Range took a beating from weather and mechanical forces, its towering summits wearing down to 4,000-foot vertical peaks surrounded by marine basins. Finally, the tectonic plates that formed Pangea drifted apart, cleaving the mountainous spine of the supercontinent into diffuse ranges that now ring the Atlantic Ocean. Pieces of the historic range span from the Appalachian Range to the Tablelands, from the peaks of Greenland to the Scottish Highlands, the Lyngen Alps in Northern Norway and even the Atlas Mountains in Morocco.

Beck grew up visiting and hiking the Appalachian Mountains. (His mother was the first woman to through-hike both the Appalachian Trail and the Pacific Crest Trail). He started his backcountry adventures in Tuckerman Ravine in New Hampshire's White Mountains and began splitboarding in the Presidential Range and the Chic-Chocs in 2010.

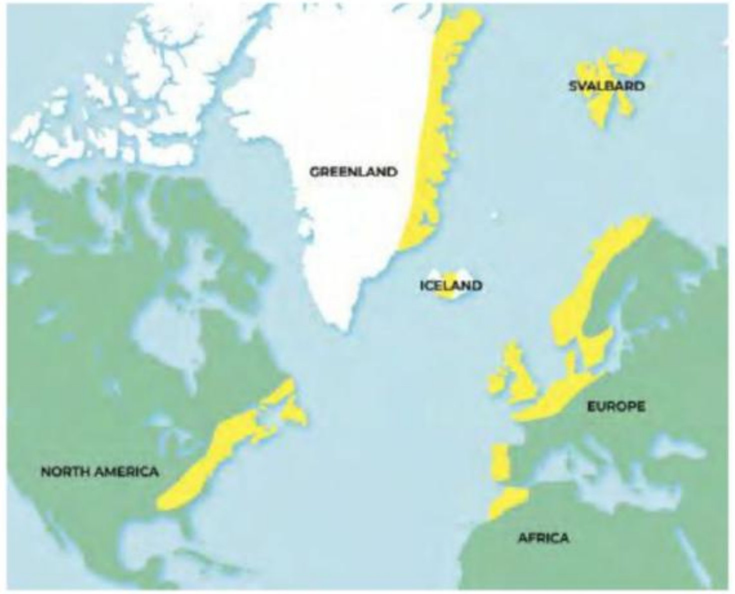
Given the stark drop off in backcountry travel as you head north from New England, through Quebec and then to Newfoundland, discovering that the Whites, the Chic-Chocs and the Tablelands were once connected was a heady mix of profundity and clarity. "It's a tough thing to wrap your head around that this was all together at one time but look at the globe and you can see how things fit," says Beck. "It's like if you had a puzzle and you drew a line straight down the middle, took it apart, and then you see the line in the other places. And that's what this mountain range is—it's baffling."

Newfoundland was where Beck dropped into the history of Pangea and the history of the place. The isolated, once-booming fishing community was hit hard when fish stocks collapsed and the government imposed a cod moratorium, putting tens of thousands out of work. Skiing and snowboarding developed as an afterthought, and recent efforts to bring in winter backcountry tourism offer a new way to survive the dark, lean and wind-beaten winters.

The Pangean Project began as a framework to explore further east, an open-ended ticket to discovery. Charting his way north one trip at a time, Beck's next stop after Newfoundland was Greenland in 2022. An admitted contrarian, Beck says he'd rather tackle the demanding intricacies of these hard-to-access areas than simply drop into the endless powder of mainstream destinations in the western U.S. It didn't take long for the striking similarities of seemingly disparate mountains to become the allure.

"You've got these mountain ranges completely disconnected by oceans, in dramatically different places—but they all started as the same thing," explains Beck. The locations he's ridden so far in the Pangean Project share the same feel on approach and descent: steep but short drops that rise up from sea level. "When you buckle in and point downhill, it doesn't feel any different."

Even in Greenland, over 1,500 miles from the Tablelands, with compromised sea ice and marauding polar bears making for a distinctive backcountry experience, the familiar was waiting. Emerging from a remote backcountry hut overlooking the Angmagssalik Fjord after waiting out a three-day snowstorm, Beck caught the sunrise over 1,968-foot Neuerniagkat Peak. The ice sheet was finally visible after white-out conditions: a flat expanse punctuated by snow-dusted peaks, each in turn peppered by brown and black rock where the wind had blasted the hardest.



Beck initially thought Greenland would be a stark contrast from his local zones in Vermont and New Hampshire. But when the sky finally cleared, he says it was an uncanny moment of overlap.

The view of a short and steep peak recalled other moments looking northeast at dawn: gearing up to hit the trail at Tuckerman, closing in on the Chic-Chocs as the range peeled skyward from the Saint Lawrence River, and the view across Newfoundland's frozen sea to a band of rough mountains created from the Earth's mantle. After riding around the world from the Alps to the Rockies, Beck never felt so far away and yet so close to home.

"Maybe it is the maritime snowpack or the lower elevation or the similar weather," says Beck. "Or maybe there is something embedded in that ancient mountain range that makes it feel like home to me."

Greenland marked a shift in Beck's perspective on the project. His quest to splitboard through the Central Pangean Mountain Range started with the intrigue of geological and snow-sliding similarities across vastly different locations. It's evolved to include a lens on the people who live in each place.

Beck and his group made it back to Kulusuk, Greenland, from their stormed-in foray just in time to glimpse hunters, driving packs of huskies, ripping off on wooden sleds after the village's next meal: two polar bears just sighted in the area. Working with the villagers to dig out after the immense snowfall and playing soccer with a group of kids, Beck considered how the local lifestyle remained largely unchanged from the Inuit people who settled this remote area almost 1,000 years ago. **>>**

Rawlings drops in on a pow surfer amidst the colorful houses of Kulusuk, Greenland. "This proved to be one of the more memorable parts of the Greenland portion of the Pangea project," says Beck.
Seth Beck

> The locations he's ridden so far in the Pangean Project share the same feel on approach and descent: steep but short drops that rise up from sea level.

Four stops in, Beck is prepping to tour the Svalbard archipelago, and he anticipates diving into a journey that ranges wider than simply reaching the next summit. In the Pangean canon, Svalbard is larger than a mountain range alone. Abandoned girders, rusted ironworks and brutalist dormitories paint a story of an Arctic nation's treaty that led to Stalin-era Russian mining.

"That's the part that was unexpected," Beck says, reflecting on what's changed since he started the project. "It was very much about the topography, the geology, how all of that was connected. Now it's a contemplation of how societies develop independent of other societies. Because these ranges broke apart and different people settled there, they're vastly different from a cultural standpoint."

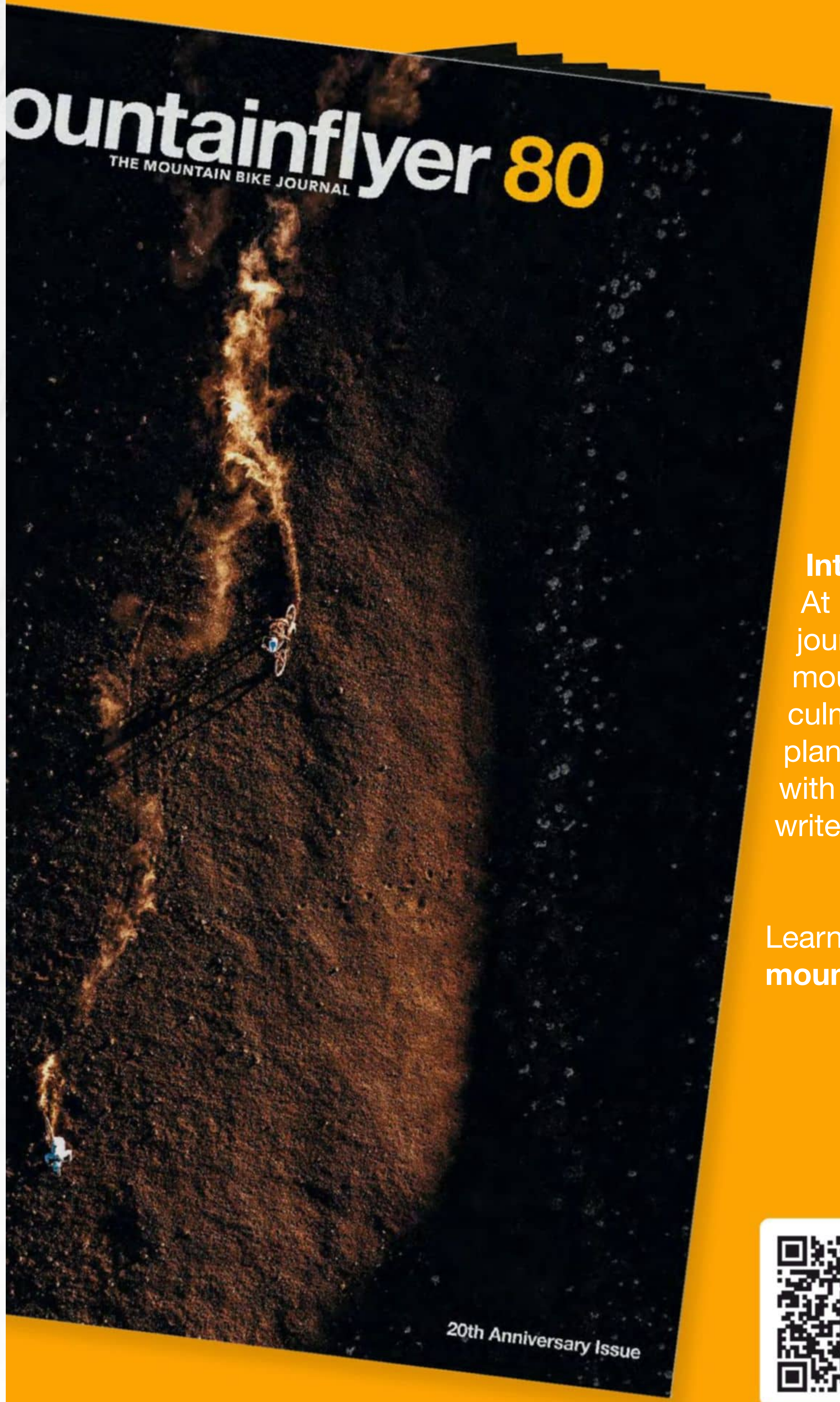
The White Mountains, with their proximity to urban areas, have become the most heavily trafficked range on the East Coast. Further northeast, the Chic-Chocs may be more remote but are still easily accessible and are experiencing a steady uptick in backcountry travel.

But add in a ferry ride (and more driving), and Newfoundland falls off the list for most skiers and riders—why go that deep when you could fly to Utah or B.C.? Instead, there are just a handful of locals keen on exploring the area's untapped descents. In Greenland, survival is the priority, and winter touring for recreation's sake is an endeavor requiring serious planning.

Even as the impacts of climate change have sped up the countdown to explore these low-elevation zones, Beck's sticking to his new mantra: "The objective is not the goal." Just like you have to be open to navigating shifting conditions and pivoting your expectations in the backcountry, the Pangean Project remains open-ended.

The Scottish Highlands and Morocco's Atlas Mountains are both part of the puzzle. Given how tricky the timing is to ride those locations, Beck is content to have the Lyngen Alps in northern Norway planned for 2025 and to see where the project goes from there. For Beck, it's the experiences along the way, not ticking off a list, that have become the reward.

"Whether learning the local history in the Legion Hall in Woody Point, Newfoundland, or playing soccer with the kids in Kulusuk, Greenland, one of the constants in all the zones I've visited during the Pangea Project is the sense of community," says Beck. "That thought stuck with me for the rest of my time in Greenland—even with how far flung the remnants of the Central Pangean Mountain Range are, the most interesting part may be less about the mountains and more about how the people and cultures evolved in different ways in those mountains." ❆



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Hut, Hut? Take a Hike

Why is it so hard to build a backcountry shelter in Washington?

by Gregory Scruggs

Evergreen State backcountry skiers and splitboarders face a frustrating midwinter conundrum: The Cascades are one of the snowiest ranges on the continent, but getting into the heart of the mountains is no small feat. Few higher-elevation roads are maintained in winter, and crowded ski areas occupy most prime real estate. With The Summit at Snoqualmie charging non-passholders $55 per day to park in its lots this year, skiers heading to public land around Snoqualmie Pass face the consequences of limited winter trailheads struggling to keep up with a growing population.

These chokepoints can be avoided—if you're prepared to slog a dozen miles up an unplowed road to reach skiable terrain. For most, that's impractical. Without a snowmobile, starting down low is a recipe for monotonous miles of road skinning and few turns.

Backcountry huts would make some terrain more accessible before spring melt opens up higher-elevation zones, but overnight accommodations are few and far between. While North Cascades Heli and Cascade Powder Guides both operate yurts, Washington lacked a single hut geared toward ungroomed, human-powered travel until this decade.

With the first new hut project on federal land in a quarter-century now entering its third season, the situation looks like it might be improving. Though Washington's current and aspiring hutmeisters caution there are plenty of moguls to those hoping to live the hut life. Bureaucratic inertia seems to prevail at the Forest Service, which is in the midst of a budget crisis and hiring freeze, while Washington environmentalists have an exceptionally strong wilderness ethic. Finally, a well-organized snowmobile lobby stands ready to throw up legal roadblocks against proposed developments that favor non-motorized user groups—and thus might theoretically encroach on motorized turf.

As John Minier, owner of Baker Mountain Guides, says with chagrin, "I've been trying to build a hut or a yurt of some sort, somewhere on National Forest land for the better part of my life."

Minier might be the poster child for this struggle. A pipe dream for a hut north of Steamboat Springs, Colorado, fizzled. After establishing his Bellingham-based guiding business he took up the Sisyphean task again when he began poking his ski tips into a gem hiding in plain sight called the Twin Sisters.

"The Sisters are like the Grand Tetons meet the Pacific Northwest," he says. "When it's good, it's the best place to ski in Washington state."

In 2019, Minier successfully pitched forestry company Weyerhauser, which owns timber stands in the foothills, to lease him land for a yurt adjacent to the National Forest. Weyerhauser's holdings effectively nix public access to the Twin Sisters in winter already. Minier felt a location on private land wouldn't infringe on existing users, avoiding potential conflict. But when he sought a building permit, the county classified a backcountry yurt as a "motel" with onerous requirements like fire sprinklers and a 12-foot-wide plowed road for fire engines.

> *"This is a classic example of public land managers regulating commercial entities because they can."*

Back to square one. Later that year, Minier sought permission from Mt. Baker Snoqualmie National Forest to build on nearby public land. The Mt. Baker Ranger District grouped Minier's proposal with three others for review in 2021. Three years later, they are still at the mercy of a slow and opaque public process. As recently as last spring, the ranger district hosted a public meeting and collected public comment with a decision expected by June 2024. While both wilderness-loving conservation groups and skeptical snowmobilers expressed concerns about everything from parking to human waste disposal, Minier's takeaway was that winter operations could begin this season.

Then, in early January, Minier learned the Forest Service had canceled the applications "due to overwhelming public opposition" and invited him to try again in a different location with less impact. The spot he pitched is adjacent to a clear-cut and half a mile from an open pit mine, both on nearby private holdings—not exactly prime public land to begin with.

"And yet, our temporary winter shelter is considered the bogeyman," he says. "This is a classic example of public land managers regulating commercial entities because they can, and not really because it makes any sense. I'm likely done trying."

Farther south, Rob Pollard is running the third season of Fortune Peak Huts east of Snoqualmie Pass. The Washington native cut his backcountry teeth around Crystal Mountain. An austral winter frequenting New Zealand's huts inspired a similar dream in the Cascades.

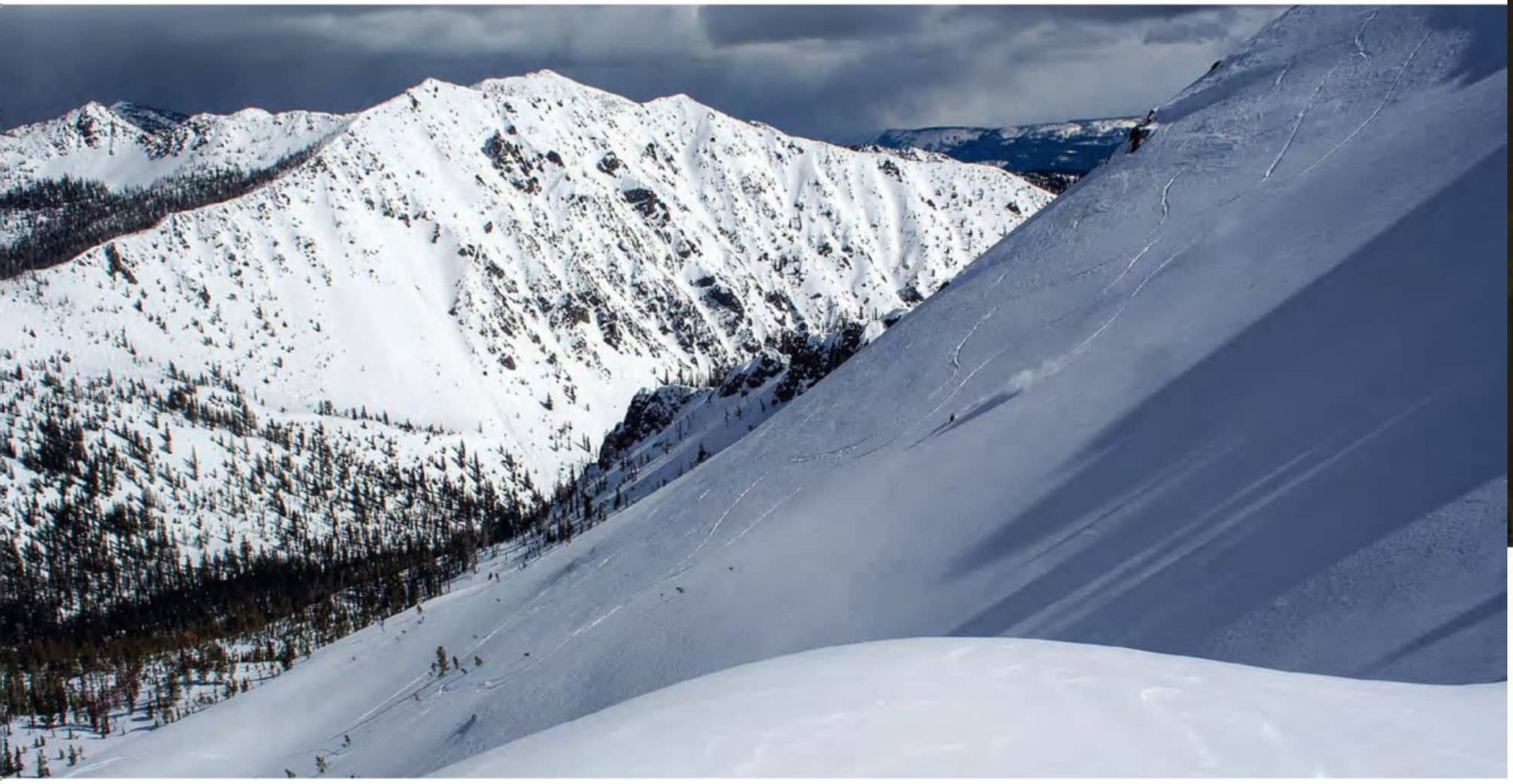
With some GIS training from college, the tech-savvy Microsoft employee scoured satellite imagery for suitable terrain. During the 2018 and 2019 winters, he explored on skis and settled on Van Epps Pass, at 6,000 feet just outside of a wilderness boundary. The broad saddle opens up a world of terrain east of the Cascade crest, where lighter snow and sunnier weather often prevail. But at 11 miles from the nearest winter trailhead, Van Epps Pass is a col too far for most mere mortals. So around the same time Minier was trying, unsuccessfully, to convince a county planning official that a backcountry yurt is not a motel, Pollard contacted the Cle Elum Ranger District in the Okanogan-Wenatchee National Forest.

Surprisingly, his proposal sailed through without a full National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) analysis. In late 2020, permit in hand, he began purchasing materials and marketing a website for Fortune Creek Huts. >>

[Facing Page] Sean Hill, Tom Battaile, Will Piro and Armanda Rocco all did critical work to get the Fortune Peak Huts up and running. They tour in on a snowy day to enjoy the product of their hard work: untracked snow and cozy backcountry accommodations.

[Left] The Fortune Peak Huts aren't permanent. Instead, they're set up and taken down at the start and end of each season.

[Right] Simple but comfortable, Fortune Peak Huts offers one of the few places for backcountry skiers to stay overnight in the Cascades backcountry. ⊡ **Courtesy Fortune Peaks Huts, all photos**



But then the Washington State Snowmobile Association (WSSA) got wind. In March 2021, the WSSA hired a Seattle law firm and sent a letter to the Forest Service threatening federal injunction. They claimed the permit was improperly issued and violated NEPA. Local sled-assisted skiers in the area also piled on with objections. After a back and forth with the Forest Service, WSSA filed a lawsuit in July. The Forest Service appointed a new district ranger in August who revoked Pollard's permit.

Pollard ponied up $10,000 for legal counsel and considered an appeal, but that would have set him back another $60,000. He eventually settled on an alternate location one drainage over at a 3,800-foot campground, rebranded the outfit Fortune Peak Huts and received a new permit in October 2022 just in time to set up for his first season.

Two years later, Pollard is older and wiser about how to make a hut happen in Washington—or anywhere on U.S. Forest Service land, for that matter. It's a day and age when federal officials are more cautious and potential opponents are more litigious.

"Make sure to get your proposal in front of as many stakeholders as possible, because you want to have solutions to potential objections beforehand," he says. "Above all, you live and die with your relationship with the Forest Service."

Cultivating that relationship is critical to overcoming land-manager aversion to rocking the boat.

"It's way easier for the Forest Service to do nothing than to do something," says Minier. "Because if they do something, somebody is going to have an opinion about that something."

While a handful of huts are not a panacea to solving the winter access equation for Washington backcountry skiers, land managers' reluctance to give these proposals a fair shake sends a discouraging signal about future lifts, like plowing more roads, that would make an appreciable difference. ❄

> *"It's way easier for the Forest Service to do nothing than to do something, because if they do something, somebody is going to have an opinion about that something."*

Matt Christie finds some late-season pow on the esteemed Iron Peak which is made more accessible by the Fortune Peak Huts. **Courtesy Fortune Peak Huts**

THE
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PODCAST

SEASON 15: LEAVING A MARK IN THE MOUNTAINS

A seminal skier whose firsts include skiing all of Colorado's 14,000-foot peaks. A pioneering woman whose leadership on and off the hill brings a legendary brand to the podium. And a splitboard guide and artist whose vision for the backcountry transcends imagination.

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THE SEASON
SO FAR
The Royal

Wendy Lewis, an avalanche forecaster for Whitewater Ski Resort, presents at The Royal during Nelson's February State of the Snowpack event. **Steve Ogle**

Bridging the Gap

State of the Snowpack is creating a space—through events and digital platforms—where backcountry users can learn about local conditions from snow safety experts within their community.

by Greta Close

My nose burns as I breathe in negative-20-degree air and turn down the sidewalk toward The Royal, a popular bar and venue in downtown Nelson, B.C. When I step inside, I'm met first by warmth and then by a sea of high-top tables and fleece-capped skiers.

We're here—all 300 of us and just as many on Zoom—for State of the Snowpack's (SOTS) monthly presentation about current backcountry conditions led by local experts. Despite arriving almost an hour early, I'm one of the last to squeeze in before capacity is maxed. Free and open to the public, it's clearly the spot to be tonight.

When Kristine McKay moved to Nelson in 2020, she simultaneously picked up alpine skiing and took her Avalanche Skills Training 1 course, eager to get into the backcountry. She was also recommended to attend SOTS. "As someone who was new to the area and new to backcountry, State of the Snowpack was probably my most useful tool," says McKay. Not only was it great for her to meet other backcountry skiers, but it was a good way to continue learning. Events include at least one snowpack-specific talk and often a guest speaker who presents on another relevant topic like weather models or avalanche safety. "Having local guides talk about what's going on in our area is so useful for combining your avalanche education with the Avalanche Canada forecast," says McKay.

Avalanche Canada is responsible for all forecasting from the coast of B.C. to Quebec's Chic Chocs. The benefits are uniformity, accessibility, and high-quality forecasts and weather models, to name a few. The caveat is that the forecasting zones are large, and, while the bulletin may be representative of a region as a whole, smaller locales within a zone can exhibit different snowpacks and therefore avalanche conditions.

In Canada, all avalanche professionals are also required to enter their observations into the InfoEx database. While that information is crucial for the creation of the forecasts, it isn't accessible to the public. Without SOTS, McKay recognizes there would be no way for her to get that beta from local guides. "It just helps keep the community so much more informed," she says. "Guides are getting 100-plus days in the backcountry, and if you're a weekend warrior, you're just not going to be able to gather the same amount of information." >>

> *"Guides are getting 100-plus days in the backcountry, and if you're a weekend warrior, you're just not going to be able to gather the same amount of information."*

[Top] Judson Wright probes the snowpack on a tour in the Whitewater backcountry, gathering information which he'll share in a snowpack update video on social media. ◘ **Greta Close**

[Portraits] Morgan Dinsdale (left) and Wright (right) ran the first State of the Snowpack event in Nelson in 2018. In the seven years since, the organization has grown to include four chapters, a growing social media following and interest from Squamish to the Yukon. ◘ **Courtesy Morgan Dinsdale; Steve Ogle**

[Facing Page] What's the point of more snowpack beta if it doesn't help you find soft, safe snow? Jodi Cross finds the goods on the backside of Ymir Peak during an Avalanche Skills Training Level 2 course led by Wright. ◘ **Greta Close**

It's just what SOTS founder and ski guide Morgan Dinsdale created the organization to do. As a member of the backcountry community who had lost friends in the mountains, Dinsdale wanted to bridge the gap between those broad forecasts and local variability to help people make safer decisions. She was inspired by Backcountry Zero events led by Teton County Search and Rescue she attended while living in Jackson, Wyoming, where community education is facilitated with the goal of lessening major incidents in the backcountry.

When Dinsdale moved to Nelson in 2017 to work as a patroller and guide, she pitched her idea to Judson Wright, an Association of Canadian Mountain Guides guide and owner of Kootenay Backcountry Guides (KBG). Wright had noticed a need for more localized beta, too. He had started uploading videos of himself talking about the snowpack to Facebook. When one went viral, he knew there was potential.

Dinsdale wanted to take that kind of information and create a live event. Backroads Brewing donated space for the first event in December 2019, and 65 people attended the first talk; 80 came to the second. Jason Wishlow, a lead forecaster for nearby Whitewater Ski Resort—which is well known for its backcountry access—attended. In turn, he joined their team, rounding out collaboration between the key facets of the ski community: the skiers, the guides and the resort.

As events developed, so did SOTS's digital presence. Social media accounts, a website and YouTube channel were all created, and they've become a valuable platform for snowpack updates. Posts go up in collaboration with a range of other accounts including Avalanche Canada and Backcountry Skiing Canada but also smaller, more local entities when relevant, like Whitewater, KBG or the Elk Valley Snow and Avalanche Workshop.

As the public in Nelson started following along, nearby ski towns did, too. Dinsdale, with help from Cath Paone, KBG's operations manager, set out to build a replicable model with toolkits for new chapters. Today, Rossland, Revelstoke and, most recently, Fernie, all operate SOTS events and are feeding snowpack updates through the organization's digital accounts.

"In our model, we believe that in every town we create a new chapter in, we want to collaborate with at least one local avalanche education provider and the local ski hill if possible," says Dinsdale, who has aided local guides in getting SOTS up and running in their communities.

Among the smaller, local avalanche centers that are common in the U.S., community outreach is built in. But for Avalanche Canada's national platform or larger U.S. centers covering an entire state or region, the community connection isn't always organic. By establishing an effective model and making it easily replicable, SOTS is lowering the barrier for any mountain town to create and maintain a space in their community centered around local avalanche education.

So far that model is working. "With the new chapters that we have now, it's really, really wonderful. And I think people are really seeing the benefit," says Wishlow. "It's just finding the key people to deliver that message, because every community is different."

This year, between the four chapters, SOTS will see over 500 people in person at each event, while a single post on social media will reach anywhere from 2,500 to 11,000 accounts. In addition, Nelson's event livestream has taken off, with 300 to 400 views per talk. With the challenge of getting into The Royal in recent years, McKay often tunes in remotely.

Now based in Pemberton, Dinsdale's focus is on the bigger picture: new chapters, more funding and increased partnerships. Currently, everyone involved is volunteering their time. The funding they do receive from local businesses and a few ski brands is going directly towards operational costs like equipment for presentations and the website domain. While seeking bigger industry partners, Dinsdale is hopeful about continuing to foster more local sponsorships in each town.

Her and Paone are also in the process of building a stronger relationship with Avalanche Canada. SOTS is clear that people should check their forecast first, then come to SOTS to learn more about local conditions and connect with avalanche professionals in their communities. Perhaps there's even a chance for reciprocity. "Our goal is to have a link from Avalanche Canada to our page and to create events where their forecasters can continue to connect with the public," she says.

It's the third Thursday in February, and I've snagged a front row table for the SOTS event tonight. Matt MacDonald, one of the creators of the Avalanche Canada Mountain Weather Forecast, is presenting. Based in Nelson, he's just one example of the kind of guest speakers SOTS can tap all over the country, and, with the goal to be in every major Canadian mountain town by 2030, they likely will be.

As I hunker in for some diligent notetaking on the famed southwesterly flow that brings cold smoke to Whitewater's drainage, I consider the fact that everyone is here because it's something they believe in.

For Wright, seeing his community come together around what he's passionate about is the real payoff. "I'm talking to the people who own The Royal, and they're like, 'Yeah, this is one of our busiest nights. We're going to bring in as many people here as we would with a big band,' and I'm literally just talking about the snow," he says, with an audible smile.

Here in Nelson, Wright and Wishlow are the local leaders, and they're setting an example for more accessible snow safety professionals—another goal of SOTS—both in person and on social media. It seems an idealistic crossover between the resort, the guide service and the locals.

"If you asked every single person who's involved in this project, they have been involved with loss in the mountains," says Dinsdale. "We really love what we're doing," she adds, "and a big part of that is just our passion to try and keep people safe." ❄

Tracks of Change

Paula Smith is charting new paths for Indigenous youth with the Washoe Youth Outdoor Expedition Program.

by Brennan Lagasse

Lance is skiing a bit fast for my comfort level. I'm brought back to the same feeling I felt while we biked together over the summer. But knowing he's had less time on snow than dirt, my unease is exacerbated. Before I have the chance to tell him to slow down, he explodes in a cloud of fresh snow. Everybody, including Lance, is audibly laughing, soaking in the joy of the moment. It's a classic winter scene at Mount Rose working alongside Paula Smith with the Washoe Youth Outdoor Expedition Program. The organization, founded by Smith, offers a healthy way for kids from the reservation to get outside.

I met Smith several years ago at a gathering of around 50 people in the town park of Minden, Nevada. The group had come together to pressure the local municipality to stop the last sundown siren in the U.S., a relic of an unjust past that the town has allowed to remain ever present. The audible, daily reminders made available through high-pitched whistle noises alerted Indigenous people (and all non-white settlers) to leave town by 5 p.m., "or else." This included the Washoe people, who have resided in the Lake Tahoe area since time immemorial. Some say they were one of the last contacted groups of Indigenous people in the U.S.

Smith is the only probation officer for the Washoe Tribe. Her process revolves around not labeling at-risk youth from the reservation as "problems" but rather getting to know them—asking how they are doing on a daily basis.

"It's a hard system to get out of once they're in there," says Smith. "Native youth are so much more likely to get involved with the court systems, and stay there, so the more I could support diversion programs to keep them out of there, the better."

Like other Native youth, Washoe youth have barriers that exclude them disproportionately from outdoor activities, and they are almost four times as likely to become incarcerated than non-Native youth. "Being outdoors is really important to our youth because [the Tahoe area] is our ancestorial land where we can share stories about historical camp sites," says Smith. "And as Native Americans we are connected to the Earth, water, animals, trees and plants that we eat, grow and share with others. It's the foundation of who we are as Native people."

Her work has created a package that provides a space where youth can get extra help with school, learn about nutrition and even have a safe space to connect around heavier social issues that plague Native reservations such as suicide and substance abuse. It all translates into life skills that go beyond the confines of a court system. In recent years, those opportunities have blossomed into many days backcountry skiing, snowshoeing and, when there's no snow, biking, hiking and fishing among other outdoor activities.

CREATING THE WASHOE YOUTH OUTDOOR EXPEDITION PROGRAM hasn't been easy. Some barriers were external. Many members of the Washoe Tribe are just starting to feel comfortable in the Tahoe Basin again, citing the renaming of prominent ski resort, Palisades Tahoe from its prior racist name. Others came from within the tribe. Many tribal adults have health problems like diabetes or obesity, not to mention the turnover rate for staff is high. When Smith proposed the program in April 2015 she faced some pushback from the tribal chairman at the time. He wanted to know why all the "bad" kids get to have fun?

Smith stresses that these hurdles are a part of forging such a program, and the support she's received and successes of participants are a testament to the value of her work. Over 5,000 youth have gone through the Washoe Youth Outdoor Expedition program. Perhaps what's more telling is a look at probation numbers. When Smith started her program there were 25 kids on probation. After the program got going there were three or four. Now, there are none.

"Kids that age out of the program often come back as junior staff members. So, there's a direct connection with some of these youth that went through the program, and then they come back as leaders for the next generation of kids," says Smith. "They're role models. When they see older kids doing it, they see themselves being able to do it too."

On her own, Smith continues to positively influence the lives of all she comes into contact with, but she's quick to acknowledge the outside support she's received to bring the program to where it is today. The Tahoe Backcountry Alliance, Tahoe Institute for Natural Science and the University of Nevada Reno at Lake Tahoe have all supported Smith in the field, providing volunteer support for activities from backcountry skiing to wilderness interpretation. Smith believes that her work is amplified when other community members, especially those in the Lake Tahoe area, work with her kids on the skills needed to backcountry ski or mountain bike. She acknowledged that a recent effort by Tahoe-based professional skier Michelle Parker went above and beyond, raising money for her program, but also creating a space for Washoe people to spend time in the Lake Tahoe area where they felt warmly welcomed.

> *"It's the laughter, the good times and knowing there is life off the reservation. Then, when [the kids] come back, they can share those experiences with others."*

"Paula is a true changemaker, a woman who has given endlessly to her community and its youth. Through her passion for the outdoors, she has not only taken them biking, hiking, snowboarding and skiing, but has also reconnected them with their cultural lands in Lake Tahoe," says Parker. "Her impact is profound, and it's a privilege to witness the joy and growth she inspires in every interaction."

Smith stresses raising money is helpful as the kids need gear, coaches and transportation support to make all of the experiences possible. The Washoe Youth Outdoor Expedition Program is entirely grant funded with no costs to the kids. It's a challenge, but, according to Smith, often the community support is even bigger impact-wise than the donations she receives. Efforts like Parker's boost youth confidence and create even more opportunities for future events to take place. There is no denying the ear-to-ear smiles on the downhill slide or the whoops and hollers while biking together.

"The more kids challenge themselves, especially outdoors, the better," says Smith. She sees the fruits of her labor flourishing and circles back to the sheer simplicity in having fun as the core of it all. "It's the laughter, the good times and knowing there is life off the reservation. Then, when [the kids] come back, they can share those experiences with others."

Life is disproportionately harder for Native kids, but as Smith says, "The memories that we create for these kids impacts their entire life." These positive memories help them heal from a turbulent past, and they encourage physical health while reinforcing traditional and cultural connections to the land. Many Tahoe locals don't know that Washoe's have a rich snowshoe history, noted as "dancing across the snow" by the first white visitors in the region. As Smith continues her work, it's likely more Washoe kids and their families will get out in the backcountry.

In a later snow session last spring, Lance takes off for a lap. This time he doesn't fall, yielding a different quality of smile that signals a readiness for more—preparation for deeper explorations into the backcountry. When you ask the kids what they think of time with Smith you get answers like, "All of the trips she has taken me on are always fun. She always includes me in everything;" "filling our days with wonder and excitement and memories that will last a lifetime;" "Paula is so much fun;" and, "I hope [she] can take us out to adventure again!"

Smith believes the future is bright for her kids and the program, as the more youth she can serve, the more those youth will be better off themselves and can return the favor back to their communities. The reciprocity is palpable, and it's a gift our greater backcountry community can learn from and celebrate as well. ❄

[Left] Paula Smith finds joy snowshoeing above Carson Valley, Nevada.

[Center] The Washoe Youth Outdoor Expedition Program exposes kids to life off the reservation and ways to recreate outside, including snowshoeing at Mount Rose Meadows, Nevada.

[Right] Participants and volunteers make snowshoes at the Steward Cultural Center as part of the Washoe Youth Outdoor Expedition Program. **Anthony Cupaiuolo, all photos**

The Master Forecaster

After 29 years with Montana's Gallatin National Forest Avalanche Center, Doug Chabot retires.

As told by Doug Chabot

When he first started ski patrolling at Bridger Bowl, Montana, Doug Chabot was awarded the unofficial title of worst skier on patrol. He may not have been the best skier at the time, but he was passionate about public service and working in the outdoors. Chabot's first time on skis was while wearing jeans on a school field trip at age 17 to a snowy mound in New Jersey. After patrolling, Chabot took a role as a newbie avalanche forecaster at Montana's Gallatin National Forest Avalanche Center in 1995. Five years later, he became the director. Last spring, after 29 years of service, he retired at the age of 59. He'll be continuing to work as a guide, avalanche consultant and running a nonprofit he cofounded called Iqra Fund, which supports education for girls in Pakistan. Below, Chabot talks about forecasting before the internet, the power of storytelling and the mistakes we all make in the backcountry. —*Megan Michelson*

I learned how to ski on 200-centimenter telemark skis. But I was tenacious. I wanted it. I loved the outdoors and knew I wanted to work outside. I was working as a bartender at Bridger Bowl, and my friend was the ski patrol director. I begged him to hire me. He said, "You're not a very good skier." I told him I was taking ski lessons, and I'm a hard worker.

The idea of snow falling down a mountain seemed outrageous to me. Who doesn't like throwing explosives? But as a ski patroller, I was also drawn to this idea of digging pits and identifying what's happening in the snowpack. It's the only job where you have a theory on how stable the snowpack is, then you get to test that theory with an explosive.

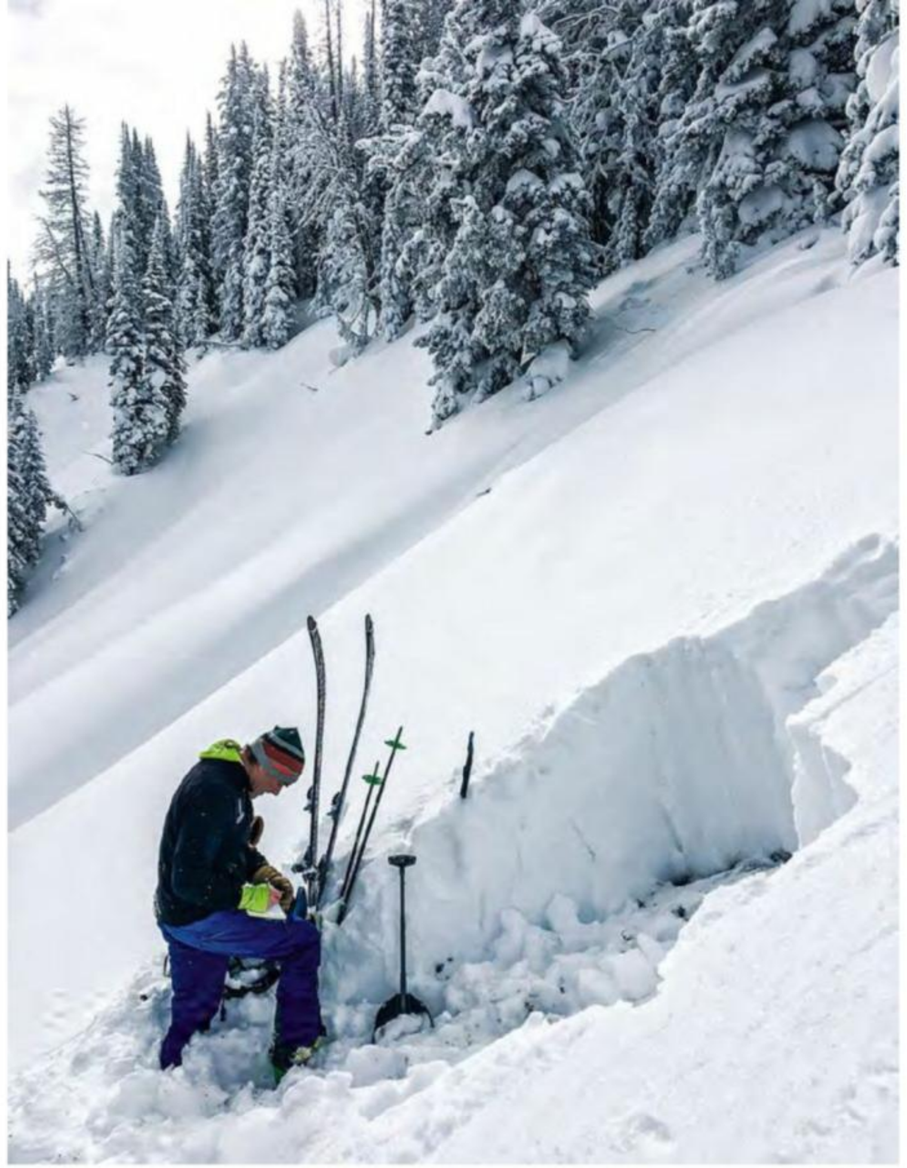
When I became a forecaster in 1995, the internet was new. Forecasts were typed out and faxed. There was no email. We'd write out the forecast, then read it aloud on the phone hotline. That's part of the reason why our forecasts are still less than 500 words. You've got about three minutes before you start to lose people's attention.

The pressure was always there to do the best you can. The public will suffer if you make shortcuts. When you're wrong, and you've blown the forecast, you've got to own it. Mistakes can happen to all of us. You can hide behind language in forecasts. People use fuzzy words: probably, might, could. Then you're right no matter what happens. You need to communicate clearly.

I've always been an advocate for giving people a story in the avalanche forecast. That's what they'll remember. If people can't remember what to look for or if the forecast is too complicated, they're not going to be able to recall that information. If a good friend calls me and says, "Hey, I'm headed to this area tomorrow. What's going on there?" then whatever I tell them should be exactly what I'm telling the public.

Don't get stuck in the weeds. The basics matter more than we think. Carry the gear, know what the forecast is, dig a pit in the snow, then ski one at a time. You do those things and the chances of you coming home safely at night go way up. >>

Doug Chabot teaches an Avalanche Level 1 course to snowmobilers in Island Park, Idaho.
Brittany Riner



After 29 years, Chabot knows a thing or two about digging a pit. He shows his expertise on a slope in the southern Madison Range, Montana. **Courtesy Doug Chabot**

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"I've always been an advocate for giving people a story in the avalanche forecast. That's what they'll remember."

In my career, 54 people died in avalanches in southwest Montana. That's a big number. When there's been an accident, the first thing you do as a forecaster is you go back and read the forecast. Did I communicate in an effective way what the problem was? In most cases, the answer is yes. Not everyone follows our advice, not everyone reads the avalanche forecast. And even if they read it or follow our advice, not everyone makes the best decisions, and sometimes, no matter what, bad luck strikes.

Avalanches happen because of what's happening inside the snowpack. So, if you're not looking inside the snowpack, you're missing a huge piece of why an avalanche might occur. Why be blind if we don't need to be? You don't have to dig a pit every time you go, but putting your shovel in the snow can help answer the question of whether or not you should put your life on the line.

People think they're skiing one at a time when they're not. We mean that literally: One person goes, and when they're all the way done, done, done, then you go. It's not one person goes, you count until 15, then you go. This is how we often end up with multiple people caught in slides.

You've got an 80% chance of digging someone out alive if it's done within 10 minutes. In the heat of battle, if your partner gets caught in an avalanche, you've got to get to them, then get them out. Ten minutes isn't much. The only way you're going to do that is if you practice.

Forget the danger rating—it leads to complacency. People put too much emphasis on a danger rating and a color instead of asking the real questions. Have there been recent avalanches? Where is the weak layer? What's the weak layer that's going to break? We always say just because it's low danger that doesn't mean it's no danger.

Now that I'm done forecasting, I'm really looking forward to not having to carry around a heavy pack. I used to have to haul around communication gear, first aid, emergency stuff. On top of that, there's the stress of making forecasts for other people. I'm looking forward to the ease and enjoyment of just doing it just for me and not having to worry about how I'm going to communicate it to everyone else. ❄

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A sore thumb is a hell of a lot cheaper than an Uber ride. A ski bum hitches a ride up the road in Revelstoke, British Columbia. **Patrick Orton**

Mountain Town Survival

In order to backcountry ski as much as possible, close proximity to mountains is a must. But it's often expensive. We polled a number of former and current ski bums on their best tips for mountain town survival, perhaps the hardest skill to master and maintain.

by Ethan Daly

I lived in Wānaka, New Zealand, the country's premier ski destination, for seven months in the winter of 2023. The 12,000-person town was ritzy. Modern, Aspen-esque houses were draped across its foothills with canvas-covered boats in each driveway. It was a wealthy Kiwi's playground.

And yet, amidst the hordes of merino-clad North Islanders, there was a subpopulation of grimy bums—New Zealanders, Canadians, Czechs, pretty much any nationality you can think of—scraping by in pursuit of the endless winter.

Some say the original ski bum ethos—sleeping in closets, leaving every day free to ski and inhaling ketchup packets—is dead. In some ways, they would be right. There aren't enough bartending jobs for all of us. Houses with mattresses stuffed in closets can be turned into AirBnBs now, complete with cleaning fees. And thanks to inflation, ketchup packet prices are on the rise.

But perhaps the ethos has evolved to fit these more trying times. Maybe this generation of skids is the bummiest yet, pursuing a skiing lifestyle against all odds. Luckily, we know where to look to find some nuggets of wisdom.

NEED A ROOMMATE ?
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Finding housing is hard. But you never know what a handwritten note on a Revelstoke bulletin board might yield. **Ryan Creary**

Housing

In Wānaka, I lived in a hobbit hole advertised on a grocery store bulletin. It sat on an old trailer bed on a failed vegetable farmer's boggy land and was crafted from the circular ends of a used cable drum connected with two-by-fours. Rent was a bargain: $300 USD per month.

Not everyone has my grocery-store bulletin board luck, but didn't Thomas Jefferson once say that the more you're willing to suffer, the more luck comes your way, or something like that? Matt Kwain, a dedicated ski bum still battling it out in Jackson, Wyoming, is no stranger to suffering. A decade ago, using a combination of willing friends' couches (including our Editor-in-Chief Betsy Manero's) and his truck camper, Kwain lived rent-free for four seasons in Steamboat, Colorado, and Jackson.

"I was sleeping in my truck, and I skied every day. I warmed up my ski boots and gloves on hand dryers, hung out at the town hot springs to get my core temperature high and climbed back into my truck to fall asleep," Kwain says from his girlfriend's employee housing in Teton Village. (Note: A relationship is also a good housing hack.)

On the occasion Kwain received a long-term invite to crash on someone's couch, he made sure to be a good guest.

"I like to cook, and I'm pretty tidy, so I would trade these couches for coming over with a 10-pound lasagna from the grocery store and making food for a bunch of ski bums," Kwain says. "I consistently got offered places to stay, and if I could sense at some place that the favor was used up, then I would make myself scarce before someone asked me to leave."

As time went on, Kwain found himself in better living situations. Couches turned into a Craigslist camper parked in his friend's mom's driveway, a house-sitting gig at a national park cabin and a room at a house in Driggs, Idaho.

When Isabel Masi, a new ski bum from Wolcott, Vermont, found herself priced out of apartments in Bozeman, Montana, she turned to four-wheeled living, an accommodation she grew accustomed to after two months chasing snow on Chile's volcanoes by van. Next up, she says, "We're going back to Bozeman to live in our friend's mini school bus."

Ultimately, finding a place to live boils down to creativity, connections and a willingness to be uncomfortable. Having a car and a sleeping bag can help you in a pinch. Community centers have hot showers. Start collecting quarters months in advance; you won't have an in-unit washer and dryer. Above all though, be kind to people, and opportunities may come your way. And, if you end up in someone else's space, wear clean socks.

Food

My plot on the failed vegetable farmer's bog did have its perks. I ate cucumbers, asparagus and green onions all winter long for free. For many mountain town dwellers, though, produce and affordable food are a serious crux. Some, like Kwain, make a four-hour roundtrip drive >>

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In today's egg climate, that's a hot ticket.

to Idaho Falls each month to buy in bulk from Costco, foregoing mountain town prices. Others are finding help offered to low-income workers.

"Food is very expensive, and it's just getting more expensive," Linnie Taylor, a Teton-based ski bum, says. "But there are some good resources. My friends and I are all below the poverty line, so we belong to the food bank. You can stock up on canned goods there, even eggs." In today's egg climate, that's a hot ticket.

Programs like this also serve to create more sustainable communities. A lot of the food given away is rescued from local grocery stores who view it as expired and otherwise would throw it away. To the stomach of a ski bum, it's a burrito waiting to happen.

Beyond food banks and dollar-taco deals on Tuesdays, Taylor seeks out community events that, in addition to enriching mountain town comradery, provide free meals. "My parents find it funny because I'm not religious at all, but there's a church in town that'll do free soup every couple of weeks, and they're very kind. They're not trying to get anything out of it, they're just hosting some soup," she says. "There's always a stigma around stuff like that but just dropping the shame and saying, 'Yeah, I'll take advantage of that,' is huge."

Lee Ringer, an Albuquerque EMT and former ski bum who lived with Kwain in his camper, similarly adopted the foraging mindset during seasons at Steamboat, Jackson and Taos. Nights as a pizza delivery driver yielded a pie-heavy diet. At the end of each summer, while working in outdoor education, Ringer made sure to grab leftover expedition food, known as "roadkill."

"I would take everything. Dehydrated minute rice, dehydrated beans, tortillas, granola bars. It would last me at least a month of ski bumming," Ringer says. "I would say in my 20s, I was a fairly idealistic guy, and I came into ski bumming thinking, 'What's the purest way I can do this?' And that's by spending the least amount of money, getting hookups and moderately starving yourself every now and then."

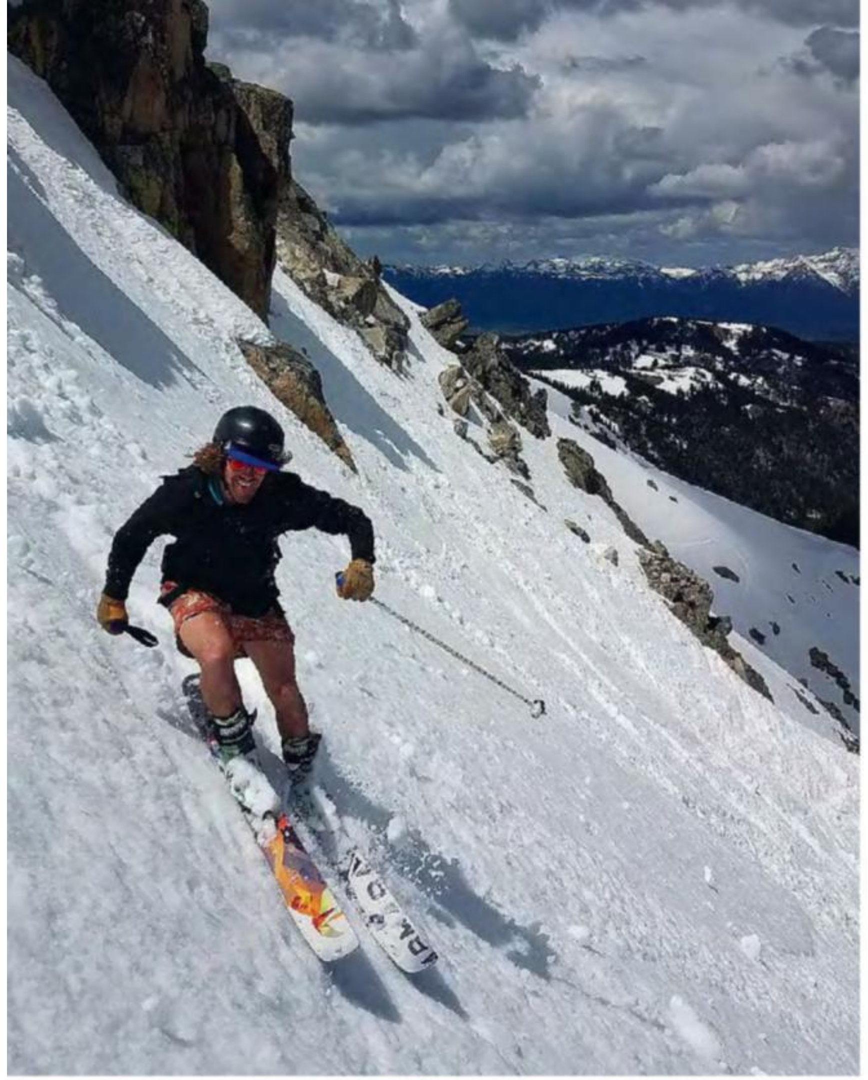
Perhaps the most extreme example of "purity" comes from Masi. Her boyfriend introduced her to the art of dumpster-diving early in their relationship. For most it would be a deal breaker, but for Masi, the activity became a form of bonding. Evenings were spent together filling their bread bins outside of bakeries in Bozeman and sifting through dumpsters of well-packaged bell peppers under old issues of *Town & Country*.

Sure, these solutions aren't glamorous, but if you know where to look and can swallow your pride, there is cheaper food to be found in mountain towns. Be a scavenger, read community bulletin boards and slide your fellow ski bum that half-eaten pizza you're clearing.

Financial Literacy

My hobbit hole in New Zealand was a temporary situation. I wasn't planning on living there long, so foregoing a comforter for my grandma's 1987 Eastern Mountain Sports down sleeping bag was the smart choice, in my opinion.

Ski bumming is full of concessions like these. Crossroads in which each skier and mountaineer must pinch pennies in order to lengthen their season in the peaks.



[Facing Page, Left] That's one kind of bagged lunch. Isabel Masi refuels on cheap pasta while guiding.

[Facing Page, Center] "Great haul," says Masi of their bakery dumpster dive harvest.

Courtesy Isabel Masi, both photos

[Facing Page, Right] Can't afford a space heater? Get a dog to keep you warm.

[This Page] After a good night's sleep on Editor in Chief Betsy Manero's couch, Matt Kwain enjoys Fourth of July corn on Jackson Peak in Wyoming's Gros Ventre Range.

Courtesy Matt Kwain, both photots

Work is a concession: The purest ski bum ethos considers any job an affront to the lifestyle. But let's be real, we all need a little cash to get by, trustafarians excluded. It goes without saying that an off-season job raft guiding, tree planting, trail building or lobstering, in Managing Editor Greta Close's case, is key. But what about in-season?

Taylor, a part-time ski instructor, is actively looking for a second job. Despite working 21 straight days over the holidays, instructing is too unpredictable. She hears her friends picking up random gigs, mostly at night. "Stocking grocery stores, janitors, snow removal, bartending, Uber, food delivery, Instacart, just things that you normally don't even think about applying for," she says.

Ringer became accustomed to frontloading his work. Two hard weeks loading 18 wheelers in a Macy's warehouse before the holidays could keep him afloat for a month. A month's guiding contract for kids backpacking trips, even longer.

Of course, after bills are paid and groceries bought, most of the extra money goes to gear. Every ski bum we talked to mentioned consignment shops and stalking Facebook Marketplace. To save money on gear, Ringer touted homemade repairs.

"If you're a ski bum, you've got to get good at repairing your stuff, whether that's sewing or patching," Ringer says. "You've got to figure it out because you can't buy new ski pants once you shred them apart. My first pair lasted me five seasons and they were sewn up with pieces of leather."

Ringer's snow pants may have been beat to shit, but the money he saved on them he poured into a Western Mountaineering zero-degree sleeping bag. That same sleeping bag got him through below-zero temperatures in the camper with Kwain.

"It's a very materialistic world we live in, but I always try to tell myself that at one point, these used skis were the top-of-the-line skis. Why can't they be now?" says Kwain.

Best of the Rest

Perhaps the most sustainable solution, however, is turning to backcountry skiing. Each ski bum we interviewed vouched for the backcountry's long-term sustainability. The requisite gear and avalanche education is prohibitively expensive, but after the initial investment it can replace the need for an expensive resort pass year after year. And it doesn't tie you down to any one resort. "It's freedom. You know? It's dangerous, of course, but it's way more freedom than skiing on a resort," Taylor says.

Whatever mountain town you're planning on pitching your tent in, though, the most common piece of advice we heard was to be a good community member.

"A good ski bum is the ski bum that is also looking out for the community because it's a pretty damn privileged thing to ski all the time," Ringer says. "Even if the least you're doing is being friendly on the chairlift and grabbing a beer for someone, those things are a big deal."

"The more people you meet, the more connections you have, the more help you'll get, and the more help you can give as well," Taylor adds. "You might meet somebody that needs something that you have, and you can help them out. And then a week later, they can help you out. You give a meal, and you get a meal." ❄

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THE TRANGO TANGO

After an unsuccessful expedition to Pakistan in 2023, Christina Lustenberger, Jim Morrison and Chantel Astorga completed the first-ever ski descent of the Great Trango Tower in May 2024.

Jim Morrison eyes his next turn down intricate and wildly exposed terrain on Pakistan's Great Trango Tower.
Drew Smith/The North Face

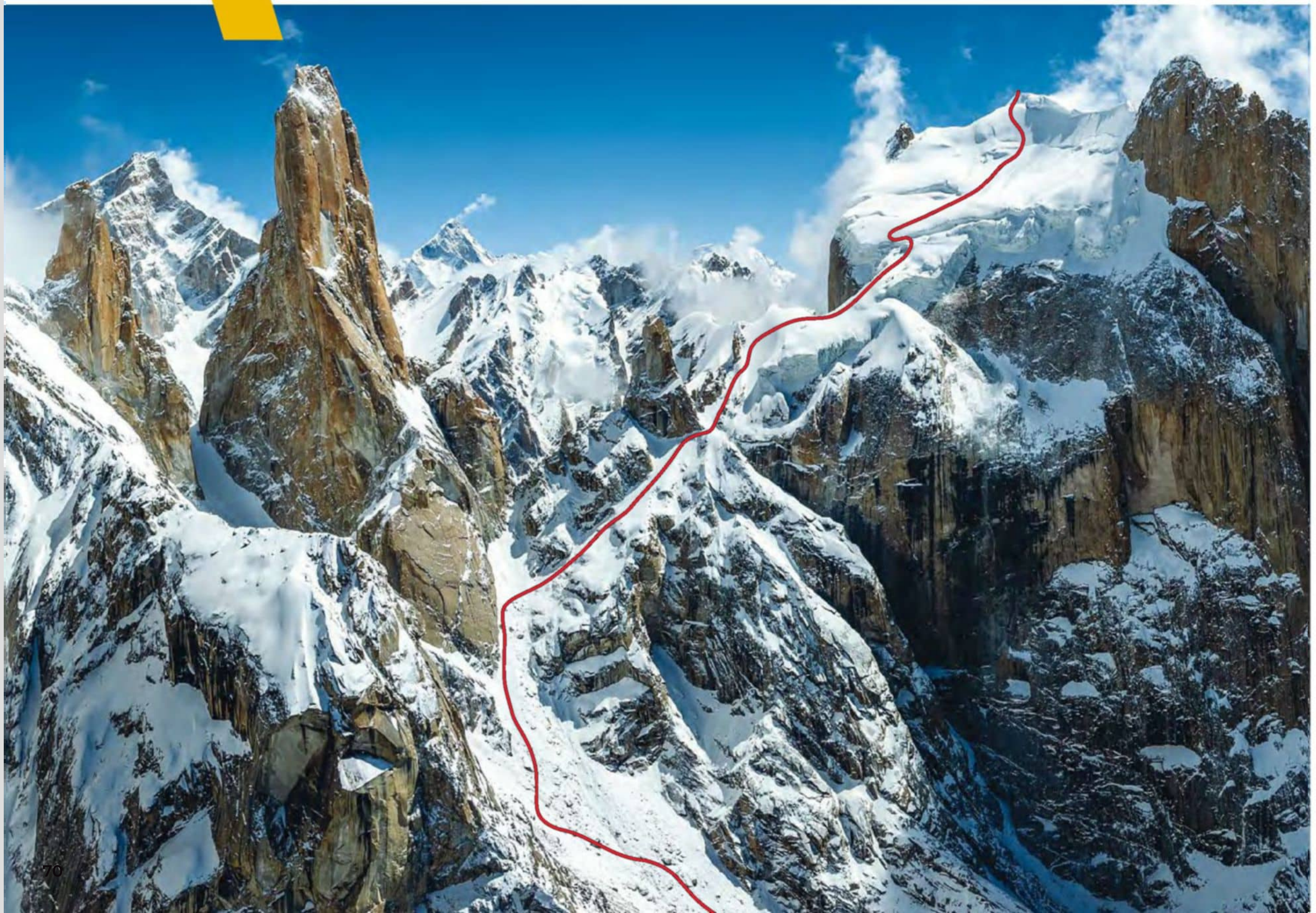
AMIDST THE KARAKORAM'S MAZE of towering peaks in northern Pakistan, the Trango Towers, with their massive cliffs and sheer walls, have long been a playground for alpinists. Among these giants, the Great Trango Tower stands tallest, its granite face soaring to 20,623 feet. In 2023, renowned big mountain skiers and ski mountaineers Christina "Lusti" Lustenberger, Jim Morrison and Nick McNutt ventured into this legendary terrain with the intention of making the first-ever ski descent of the Great Trango Tower. Despite getting close, their attempts were foiled by illness and poor conditions.

Determined to complete the objective, Lustenberger and Morrison set to planning a second expedition for spring 2024. This time they invited climber Chantel Astorga, a former highway avalanche forecaster and fellow The North Face athlete, and big mountain skier Sam Anthamatten to join their team. (Anthamatten was unable to participate due to visa complications.) After 68 days in the mountains, Lustenberger, Morrison and Astorga, successfully summited and skied the Great Trango Tower on May 9, 2024. —*Kira Corasanti*

[Facing Page, Top] Morrison enjoys a warm meal and a good view from high camp. **Savannah Cummins/ The North Face**

[Facing Page, Bottom] The route. After lacing turns down the headwall, Morrison, Christina Lustenberger and Chantel Astorga navigated crevassed terrain and a rock pitch. Still, they managed to keep skis on for most of the descent. **Leo Hoorn**

[This Page] Morrison, Lustenberger and Astorga make their way from base camp to high camp with a summit push on the horizon. **Savannah Cummins/ The North Face**



AS TOLD BY JIM MORRISON

Everything I'd ever seen of the Trango Towers was just these really dramatic vertical walls of granite—a legendary test piece for the world's greatest rock climbers at extreme altitude. Since I was a kid, they seemed so wild, ethereal and difficult.

I'd never been to Pakistan, but after a conversation with Andres Marin and Anna Pfaff, two alpine climbers on our North Face team who'd climbed the Trango Towers years ago, I started thinking it might be skiable.

In our first year, we made it to high camp quickly, acclimatized and had a good weather window, so we pushed for the summit. We got really high but hit a huge crevasse we couldn't cross in time, so we turned back. At the time, we weren't sure if we'd try again. It was a hard day, but we decided to wait for another weather window. But we just had a bunch of things go wrong—Christina got sick, it snowed a lot, and we ran out of time.

It was also super challenging for me to be on an expedition just by myself, without Hilaree [Nelson], being in a tent for a little over a month without my partner. Lying in solitude and being off the grid and away from the world was totally awesome and also extremely difficult for me, all wrapped into one. We left, but soon after, we realized we had to go back since we had almost pulled it off on our first try.

By the second year, I was in a much better place mentally, and the challenge shifted to team dynamics and getting everyone comfortable. I'd come from doing most of my big mountain expeditions with Hilaree, who was an extraordinary partner. Christina and I were close, but I'd only met Chantel once at an athlete summit. Neither of us had spent much time with her, so there was a lot to figure out, especially because she had never been there before.

We ended up just spending a whole month not really doing much. And when you're an athlete that trains physically really hard to go on a big expedition like this, and then you just have to sit around and camp for a month day after day after day, it's emotionally and physically draining. But that's also a part of what makes it so hard, fun and memorable.

After 60 days at base camp at the end of our second year, we went for the summit on our last weather window. The weather was perfect, and we made it to the top, marking a pretty monumental achievement for us.

It was pretty magical to be on top of the Tower and look out. I was staring at K2, Broad Peak, Gasherbrum I, II, IV—iconic 8,000-meter peaks I'd read about my whole life. Seeing them all at once from the top was a holy-shit moment, and it was pretty emotional, followed by a really rad shred down the mountain.

As for the skiing, the top was icy, but below that, it was soft, sun-affected powder that skied really well for the first 1,500 vertical feet. It was pretty amazing—I was able to ski that whole section quickly, really how I'd like to be skiing in the mountains as opposed to descending carefully.

Once we worked our way through the crevasse, we had more good skiing below. Lower on the mountain, we had some abysmal conditions: really firm, icy, kind of refrozen sun-affected snow. We ended up skiing from high camp to base camp in the dark, through bulletproof, refrozen chunder.

Pulling off a ski descent is something I'm really proud of and something really special for me. Honestly, the accomplishment makes all the difficulties—the days in the tent, the uncertainty, the confusion—just dissipate. We were safe, we were careful, we were pragmatic, and we were successful.

DID WE TRY HARD ENOUGH?

SHOULD WE HAVE TRIED HARDER?

Morrison reaches the summit of a two-year project.
A dream line awaits. **Courtesy The North Face**

AS TOLD BY CHRISTINA LUSTENBERGER

When you look at a line that captivates your imagination, you're like, "Whoa. That is an improbable place to go." And in a lot of ways the Great Trango Tower was improbable, and that's probably why it hadn't been done. But as a skier, I like the improbable. I like putting the pieces of the puzzle together. And I like working hard as an athlete to evolve my skills, to be able to go into improbable terrain.

In 2022, I pitched The North Face the expedition process to go climb and ski a new first descent in Pakistan, and I ended up being the expedition leader for what was a two-year process: us going there in 2023 and trying it, and then again last spring in 2024, when we were successful.

The culmination of all these things, these bigger expeditions, it's not just like, "Oh, we went and did this this spring." It's a lifetime of mastery and time spent in the mountains that lead to these things.

What held a lot of weight for me was that I was going to one of the great ranges where some of the best alpinists and climbers had gone and tested themselves. It felt like I was in this huge arena, going to do something that was going to push me in all aspects of myself: emotionally and physically. And it did.

Turning around is an interesting process, both emotionally and physically—it can feel different each time. Sometimes it's clear, and you feel it in your body, like fear. Other times it's more of an emotional feeling, something that sits more in your intuition. It's never easy. If you turn around, there's always this painful feeling in your heart, like, "Did we try hard enough? Should we have tried harder?" As a professional athlete, I just have to be okay with that on that day and the next day and move forward because it's my job.

The Trango Towers is one of the world's greatest ranges for many reasons. You can't really describe the scale of these places. It's just so mind blowing. And the beauty and energy of horizontal and vertical worlds and rock and ice coexisting so fiercely is something pretty wild. There is this raw beauty in it. To move through it, to find your little self moving up through this ginormous place, is very wild.

In 2024, we returned with Chantel, which was super nice. There's an importance for me to have another woman on the team. These expeditions are really hard, especially as a woman, and having another one there was something I advocated for.

There are a lot of variables, and you can't control them all. What you can control is going when you've evaluated the snow, the weather is what it needs to be, you've evaluated the risk you're willing to accept, and it just leads to having a really magical day up there. It's wild to be up there and feel calm.

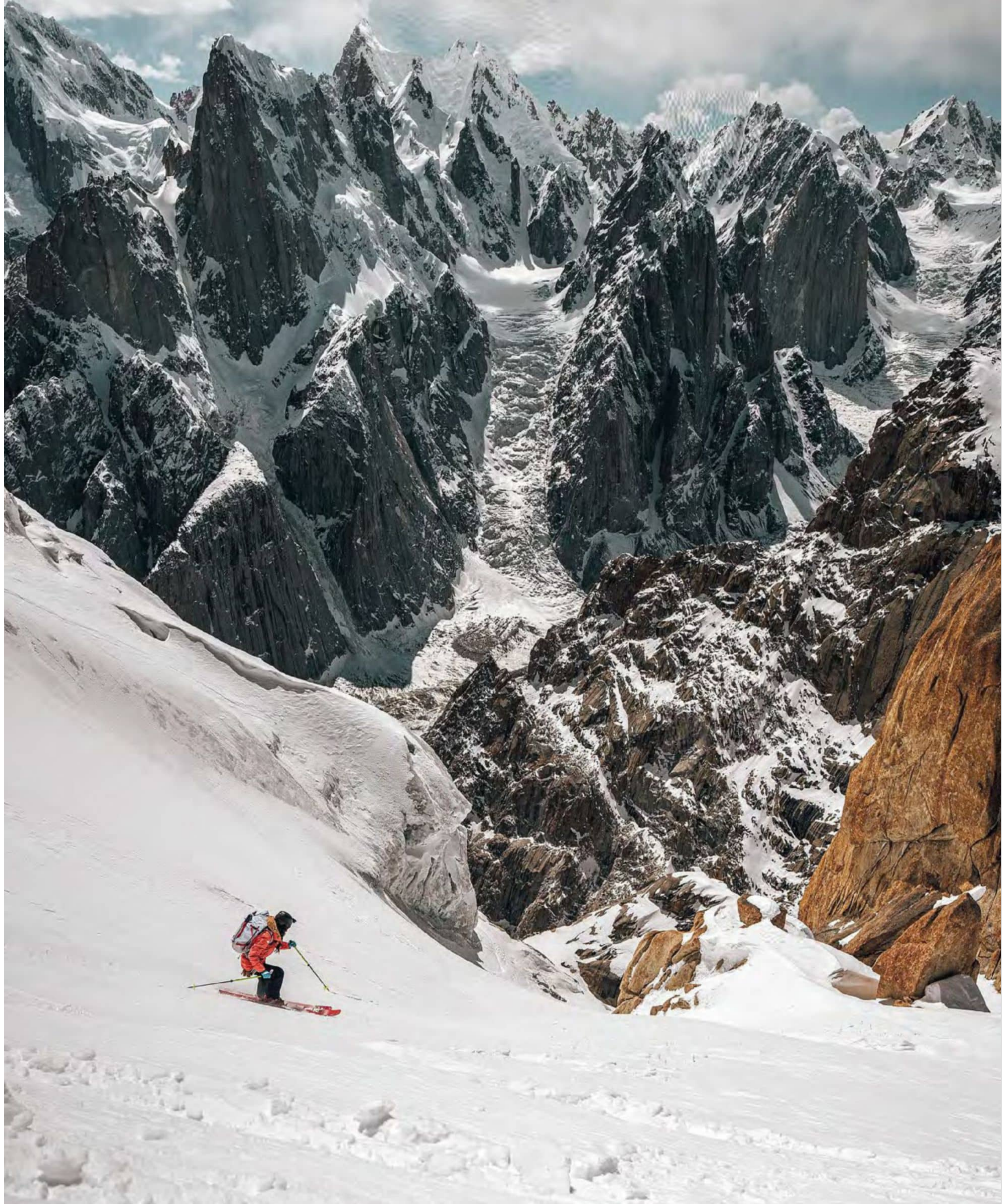
For me, the biggest thing is holding my own experience, because once you're down and hand off cards, photos and films, it's open to everyone else's interpretation of the story they want to create. Whether or not it's true to what I think, in life, all we have is our own experience. I just try to be proud of that and what we accomplished and remember it intensely. Being up there, in that position, with perfect timing, skiing strong and feeling in flow—it was truly something I won't forget.

> **YOU CAN'T REALLY DESCRIBE THE SCALE OF THESE PLACES.**

[Top] Near-summit selfie. Lustenberger snaps a shot before topping out on the Great Trango Tower. **Christina Lustenberger**

[Bottom] As Lustenberger expected, the expeditions were both mentally and physically challenging. She pauses while feeling sick en route to high camp to acclimate and stash gear. **Savannah Cummins/The North Face**

[Facing Page] Lustenberger navigates steep snow stuck to glacial ice where the route enters a system of ramps to get to the Nameless Gully. **Drew Smith/The North Face**



AS TOLD BY CHANTEL ASTORGA

My first reaction [when I was invited to join this expedition] was excitement. I've spent enough time ski mountaineering in the Alaska Range and other places that I'm not necessarily uncomfortable in that environment with skis on. But there was a bit of an intimidation that followed—going with Jim and Lusti, whose craft is skiing.

It seemed like a really cool opportunity. And of course, I figured I could grow as a skier by being there with them and then, of course, the Trango Towers are somewhere that I've always wanted to visit. However, I always thought I'd visit for climbing, so it was pretty cool to shift that mindset to being like, "Oh, I get to go there to ski."

The Trango Towers are completely encompassed by some of the most profound peaks in the Himalaya. It's one of the most iconic and famous granite, high-alpine climbing areas in the world.

The day of our descent unfolded quite nicely. The trailbreaking was more difficult than any of us anticipated, and therefore the ascent was slower. Fortunately, we had those tiny little plates for your ski boots [ascent plates]. The lower half of the route was almost-supportable, frozen snow, but not quite supportable enough to hold your body weight. You'd step, and it would hold you, and then you'd fall through basically waist deep. Those [plates] saved us.

Once we got higher up onto the hanging glacier, near the headwall on the top and the summit, the snow was soft. It was waist deep, and then quite steep, so there was a lot of wallowing up there. But there were very few technical difficulties on the ascent. There's one little rock pitch that's super short.

Where those guys got turned around last year—at the hanging glacier and then the hanging serac—it was a super easy passage this year. You had to be gentle moving through it, just because of the deep crevasses. But there was nothing technical about it. We made quick work of getting to the summit. We ended up reaching the summit in the late afternoon, not long before dusk.

The conditions were good enough up high, kind of some denser, hot pow. It was warm up there. It was awesome to watch those guys just open it up on the upper headwall where I skied more conservatively (like most people would ski in the alpine environment). That was quite spectacular. Most of the rest of the route was quite variable conditions: sometimes survival skiing, sometimes just super firm. In general, everybody was skiing more cautiously.

I had never considered how you could ski these bigger, more complex mountains, and that was pretty cool for me and quite inspiring.

It was really nice to be up there with Lusti, but it was also nice to have Jim's energy. We had a really nice balance. ❄

[Facing Page] Astorga takes in the great walls of the Trango Towers. **Savannah Cummins/The North Face**

[Above] "Christina linking turns below the crevasse in evening light next to our ascent line," says Morrison. The Karakoram stands guard in the background. **Courtesy The North Face**

[Right] Day after day, the trio assessed snow conditions and route challenges from camp. **Savannah Cummins/The North Face**

IGNORING THE TEMPTATIONS OF CONVENIENCE

by Tom Hallberg

Stratton Matteson spends more days deep in the Cascades than any other splitboarder, but when he considered the impact of driving a gas-guzzling car into the mountains, he simply said no. For five years, he quietly pioneered a more environmentally sustainable path, biking every time he went out. It was a way for him to live his ideals, provide an example for those with similar ethics and expend his boundless energy.

[Opening Spread] A life on two wheels is the life for Stratton Matteson, whether that's riding to the grocery story or approaching the Cascades for a day of splitboarding.
Danny Kern

[Facing Page] Deep in Oregon's Three Sisters Wilderness, Matteson sets the skintrack for one last line before a 20-mile pedal home.
Jason Hummel

LEGEND HAS IT

that before dawn on winter mornings in Central Oregon a lone cyclist pedals the dark roads toward the mountains. In the interstitial silence between the scrape of snowplows on the Cascade Lakes Highway and the murmur of traffic headed to Mount Bachelor, you'll catch the haunting echo of a squeaky crank, the *tik-tik-tik* of a chain feeding over cassette teeth.

Ice hangs in his beard. Frosty exhalations trail behind him, ghostly tendrils dissipating into night. By the time anyone else is up, he's gone, the bike left at a trailhead and a skintrack fading into the forest the only clues of his existence. Word is he's riding the steep, alpine lines you dream about.

Oregon is a place of myths. Its indigenous tribes believe Coyote has played tricks on them since time immemorial. In modern times, weed-addled hippies and paramilitary wannabes alike chase Sasquatch through thick forests, sustained by whispers and shadows. Conspiracy-minded Northwesterners believe D.B. Cooper, who in 1971 hijacked a plane out of Portland, stole $200,000, parachuted into the woods and was never found, survived, despite the prevailing evidence that he died in the jump.

In short, Oregonians are predisposed to believe the unbelievable, but this yarn of the cyclist who leaves before everyone gets up, splitboards all day and comes home after everyone is tired is true.

* * *

THOUGH HIS BEARD and tendency to traipse through the woods during twilight could inspire Bigfoot rumors, Stratton Matteson isn't a mythological creature, just an anomaly. At 27, he's done a lifetime of long tours and big objectives from the saddle of his Surly Ogre.

Starting from his home in Bend, he rides about 120 backcountry days a year. A typical bike-to-board day might include 40 to 60 miles round trip of pedaling, along with climbing and riding a couple of high-alpine laps, which in the Cascades are often 3,000 feet apiece. He snow camps more than most, maximizing the pedaling by linking big days. "The style and the fashion in which I have to do it make me more committed," he says.

Eight-thousand feet in a day might feel casual to Matteson. He'd never tell you that, but his friends will. "He's just got these tree trunks of legs because he bikes everywhere," says fellow Cardiff Snowcraft-sponsored rider Neil Provo. "He's a beast, an absolute beast."

Midwinter, the Oregon Cascades are a difficult labyrinth to crack. Approaches can be 10 miles or more round-trip (after reaching the trailhead), and wind and snow hammer the alpine zones on Matteson's nearby peaks like the Three Sisters, Broken Top, Three Fingered Jack and mounts Jefferson and Washington. Dozens of lines drape each one—myriad fins, couloirs and headwalls—and, unlike the masses who wait until spring, Matteson is out there, often alone, picking them off throughout the winter. "No one else is doing that," says Jason Hummel, a photographer and first ascensionist with one of the most impressive Pacific Northwest resumes.

This past October and November, before most people scrape their storage wax off, Matteson ticked off impressive alpine excursions like South Sister's now-dead Clark Glacier and a double-dip day on South Sister and Broken Top. With hundreds of big descents across the state, Matteson is a professional splitboarder in the vein of Nick Russell, one who's built a name solely on backcountry pursuits. "He's the

[Top] In the Wallowa Mountains, with snow everywhere and not a single other track, Matteson and Jason Hummel had all the pow to themselves. By the end of the day, "there were big smiles and tracks everywhere," says Hummel.

[Bottom Left] Thanks to his car, Hummel rolled up with fresh legs. Meanwhile, Matteson pedaled his way to the trailhead.

[Bottom Right] Long winter nights mean plenty of time to spin plans for new adventures. "In Stratton's world, that means a 5 a.m. wakeup call, and I sometimes wonder if there's a big enough map to contain his day's ambitions," says Hummel. **Jason Hummel, all photos**

> **"IT'S A REALLY RESOURCE-INTENSIVE SPORT, AND THE RESOURCE INTENSITY HAS BEEN ALMOST GLORIFIED IN THE SKI WORLD."**

guy in Oregon, right?" Hummel says. "I think about things that I've done in the Cascades, and I spent a whole lifetime. He's done more in a couple of years than I'll probably do in my whole life."

It's clear Matteson's motivation isn't to garner acclaim or talk up that objectively impressive list. "The thing that keeps me coming back is the opportunity to explore and ride wherever you want and see something that's inspiring to ride, and then figure out how to go about doing it," he says. His friends agree. "It's not about being a name or putting out a movie," riding partner Matt Colton says. "He really wants to get a nice ride. He really wants to tire himself out."

Colton, Hummel and others focus on Matteson's indefatigable enthusiasm for hiking and riding, and his intensity and humor on the skintrack. But being the top rider in Oregon is just one part of his story—the other is his steadfast environmental philosophy and commitment to calling attention to fossil fuel use in the ski industry. For Matteson, the need to snowboard exists alongside a desire to forge a relationship with the mountains based on reciprocity, not exploitation or consumption, and to be an example for others to challenge their own practices.

That ethos came, in part, from an unlikely place—New York City.

* * *

IN 2016, ROBIN GREENFIELD HAD A CRAZY IDEA. He lives a zero-waste lifestyle, but for one month, he would consume like the average American, buying packaged foods and dining out several times a week. "The catch is," he says, "I'm going to wear every single piece of trash that I create in order to create a visual that shows just how much trash one person makes." By the end, he was wearing 84 pounds of trash in a clear plastic suit, walking around the Big Apple as part of his Trash Me campaign to demonstrate the extent of our consumptive lifestyles.

A well-known environmental activist, Greenfield works on issues of overconsumption, waste and cleaner living. "The power is the people who see them," he says of his campaigns, which he promotes on social media and in the traditional press. "They see the truth. When we don't know the truth behind our actions, we're not going to change them." One person who noticed Trash Me was a young Stratton Matteson, already charting his way as an up-and-coming splitboarder. It planted the seeds of a radical transformation.

If it strikes you as odd that a snowboarder in his early 20s was making life choices based on environmental activism, Matteson's upbringing will be instructive. Born in Eugene, Oregon, he moved with his parents to Vermont when he was 7, then to Bend in high school. In those intervening years, his family traveled as his parents, George Wuerthner and Malia Matteson, worked for environmental nonprofits and wrote a plethora of guidebooks and ecology texts. "Both of them played a big role and had a big influence in shaping my values and my outlook on the world," he says, "And that started at a young age."

After sustaining a knee injury riding the Mount Bachelor terrain in his late teens, three subsequent surgeries and a year and a half of rehab, the young rider gravitated toward splitboarding. He'd been drifting that direction, and post-recovery he wanted full days in the mountains that would be less harsh on his body. There was, however, a problem.

"It's a really resource-intensive sport, and the resource intensity has been glorified almost in the ski world," Matteson says. "The top thing is to get in a helicopter and get dropped off, or fly around the world and then get in a helicopter and get dropped off. Or that's what you'll see in a lot of films." He's not wrong. Data on the carbon footprint of skiing is scant, but in 2024 French resort Tignes estimated a resort skier's daily carbon emissions to be 108 pounds, with 52% coming from transportation. Just a few percentage points come from resort operations, the rest from gear production and food, meaning backcountry skiing has similar emissions levels as a resort day.

Heli, a heli-skiing blog and travel site, estimates taking a bird leads to 374 pounds of emissions per skier, per day. Some companies have committed to carbon-offset programs to reach neutral emissions, but those are unregulated and often rife with problems. A single domestic flight leg creates 500 to 1,000 pounds of carbon emissions per passenger. For comparison, the average American produces between 50 and 100 pounds per day.

Looking at that landscape, Matteson opted out. "At a certain point, I said, 'Well, yeah, I don't like that,'" he says. "I'm directly contributing to this issue, all in the name of snow and snowboarding and backcountry riding. And it is a pretty selfish pursuit."

One option would have been to stop snowboarding. Another was, as he puts in his Instagram hashtags, to go "off fossil." Inspired by Greenfield's radical activism and the proliferation of bike-to-ski movies, in which athletes use two wheels for a long trip or single objective, Matteson set a goal of going one year on the bike. One year of early mornings and late nights. One year of meeting partners who commuted in warm cars at trailheads. One year of cold fingers and a frozen beard.

One year came, then went. Then, two, then three. Four. Five. "There wasn't a reason for me to go back, especially with how I felt it was all based around ethics and morals," he says. "Once I realized that, there wasn't really a thought of going back."

Things stayed that way until this fall.

* * *

PART OF BEING A PROFESSIONAL SNOWBOARDER is going on brand trips. Companies sponsor athletes to be ambassadors, to sell skis and boards and apparel, to be in front of the camera. That requires travel, but when Matteson is invited on Cardiff Snowcraft trips to Salt Lake City, he doesn't abandon his ethos. He also doesn't pedal the 650 miles.

"These team trips where he'd come out, he'd ride the train from Oregon out to Utah," teammate Provo says. "That was pretty cool to see another aspect of his dedication to the environment."

As a journalist and observer of the bike-to-ski fad, namely the attention it's received in films and brand marketing, I've been skeptical. Athletes use their films to talk about biking's environmental benefits. Then through subsequent trips or social media, it's clear they return to driving, flying, snowmobiling and heli skiing to sustain their profession. Call it greenwashing, call it an unwillingness to change for the greater good, call it the reality of living in a fossil-fuel-powered world, the results are bluster and big words without meaningful change.

For Matteson, it's a lifestyle, not a one-off. His commitment to removing himself from a broken system is comprehensive. When he's not splitboarding, he runs almost every aspect of his native plant landscaping business, Tangled Roots Restoration, with an e-bike and trailer. Even the concept of returning high-desert flora to Bend's yards fits with the praxis of environmental consciousness.

It's limiting, no doubt. Demarcating oneself in a radius defined by a train and bike cuts off many of the world's finest ranges. "Me and him will kind of get at it because I like to travel, and I really have wanted to get him on a trip," Colton says.

So far, Matteson has valued his position as an environmental example above all else. If most bike-to-ski forays have been transient, Matteson took a page out of Greenfield's book and went to one extreme to shake up the status quo. "It's not like I expect everyone to go out and just start riding the bike everywhere, or go completely cold turkey," he says. "The intention is to get minds thinking and starting to analyze things more and being intentional about our actions."

As Greenfield puts it, "We need extreme people because, it's just a simple fact, if nobody takes it to the extreme, then we never see that we can go to a further possibility."

Embodying that extreme, however, has been tiring. After five years, Matteson started noticing the limitations. Spending 14 hours a day to go touring meant he wasn't seeing his partner, Maddie, as much. It was hard

"WE NEED EXTREME PEOPLE BECAUSE, IT'S JUST A SIMPLE FACT, IF NOBODY TAKES IT TO THE EXTREME, THEN WE NEVER SEE THAT WE CAN GO TO A FURTHER POSSIBILITY."

Always in search of the next smooth(ish), white strip of snow, Matteson gazes upon the unique landscape of Oregon's Steen Mountains while approaching the day's objective. Danny Kern

ROAD
CLOSED

to see friends, except on the skintrack. Speeding back to Bend at night, sweaty from touring, his face and fingers felt that much colder.

So, he made a fundamental reevaluation and in fall 2024 bought an electric vehicle, an all-wheel-drive Chevy Equinox. He's already driven it to Washington to test himself in the North Cascades. If that feels like selling out to you, I'd challenge you to imagine having lived that way for five years, the amount of missed time with loved ones, the late nights spent repacking and planning.

Matteson has been one of the extremes that Greenfield says push the middle. Maybe, as Matteson makes his life more sustainable, it's time for us to pick up the mantle. And it's not like he'll never return to the saddle. "I love biking, and I'll definitely be doing plenty of biking exploration and trips," he says. "But I also really love snowboarding and splitboarding, and getting this EV is kind of a compromise."

* * *

NORTH SISTER IS THE CRAGGIEST and least skied of the Central Oregon triad. Matteson and friend Sadie Ford, another bike-to-board enthusiast, hiked toward camp at the mountain's base in "this sleet, rain, squall bullshit," Ford says. Most would have turned around, but they persisted, banking on a turn in the weather.

The Cascades have a habit of turning awful, rainy conditions into creamy pow for the optimistic. On this February 2024 trip, Ford says, "We got into camp that night, and it just all blew off and opened up." On their second day, they headed for the North's Thayer Headwall. East facing, fluted, overhung by rotten rock and with a tight, well-defined choke, it's rarely in condition and safe. According to Matteson's research, few men have skied it midwinter and, until then, no women.

"The whole time on the way up, he's just gassing me up," Ford says. "He's like, 'You know, you're gonna be the first woman to do this line in winter.'" Turns out, he was right. The pair joined the elite club of those who have decoded Thayer's complex equation of a long approach, brutal weather, damp camping and overhead hazards.

Beyond the environmental principles and long days in the saddle, big objectives are Matteson's niche in the Northwest, what makes him a riddle wrapped in an enigma wrapped in Gore-Tex. "Here's a guy going out skiing all the hard peaks, oftentimes by himself," Hummel says. "He's out there in the middle of winter, and he'll spend a week out there. It's brutal, it's excruciating, and he's just ready to go."

No matter his mode of transportation, he's still going to be ready to go. We'll certainly hear the *tik-tik-tik* of a bike chain less, but his friends are proud of his yearslong commitment and excited to see more of him. He's quietly led the charge to bring awareness to the industry's environmental impact, and now the ball is in our court. Behind the wheel of his electric Chevy, he's staying true to that goal by setting a new example that's more attainable for the average person.

As Ford says, "He's got his vector pointed on what is important to him and doesn't get caught up in the snares of life and the temptations of convenience.

"This is what is good for his life and his heart. And he's still doing it in a way that aligns with his ideals." ❆

[Above] According to Hummel, "There's nothing that says we're in the right place more than a 'Road Closed' sign."
📷 **Jason Hummel**

[Facing Page] All in a day's work. After who knows how many miles of pedaling and skinning, Matteson snakes his way down a couloir. "Stratton rides very fast and is so smooth, making some of the most variable and less-favorable conditions seem effortless," says Danny Kern.
📷 **Danny Kern**

Niseko-based telemark skier Diana Rivera Garcia sinks into classic Hokkaido powder with Mount Yōtei in the background. The volcano is included in Kyūya Fukada's *One Hundred Mountains of Japan* and is sometimes called Ezo Fuji due to its resemblence to Japan's highest peak. ⊡ **Iz La Motte**

CONTOURS

HOKKAIDO

The North Island

by Betsy Manero

The train from Tokyo to Hokkaido—Japan's northernmost island and largest prefecture—crosses under the Tsugaru Strait to the city of Hakodate on Hokkaido's southern tip. From there, a few different lines travel along the southern peninsula, up the neck to the capital city of Sapporo or one of the many nearby ski resorts. The island's chain of stratovolcanoes pepper the landscape along the way. This is as far as many visitors will go, but it's only the gateway to the island. Roughly the size of Austria and with the mountains to match, Hokkaido is home to skiing hotspots like Niseko and Furano. While the local government agencies are discussing how to keep inbound tourism sustainable, there are still plenty of those famous powder turns, Ramen bars with no English menus and perfectly spaced trees to be found off the beaten path.

When cold air from the Sea of Japan makes landfall on Hokkaido's shores, perfect powder ensues. Yuki Kanitani comes up for air during one such storm. **Iz La Motte**

I've been breaking trail for almost 1,000 feet.

The snow continually changes from boot-top to thigh deep, and more is circling down in sparkle tornados. My legs burn from pushing aside 3 feet of crystalized water with every step, but the ridge is coming into view, and the glades around us are untouched.

Behind me, photographer Iz La Motte and Yuki Kanitani, a professional skier who splits time between British Columbia and Hokkaido, follow in my trench. As our tour guide for the day, Yuki diligently points me in the right direction, describing a knob that will be our stopping point on the ridge.

The snow started coming down last night as Iz and I picked up our rental car—an off-white Toyota Aqua we've nicknamed the soybean—in Sapporo, a fitting welcome to the powder capital of the world. With a two-hour drive to Niseko through a snowstorm ahead of us, we settled for a quick Seven-Eleven stop for dinner and ate our egg salad sandwiches on the road. The fat flakes of the storm paused as we passed under milelong tunnels, a commonplace feat of engineering on Hokkaido's winding, mountainous and avalanche-prone highways. Even at 9 p.m., snow removal crews were shoveling piles of freshly fallen precipitation into sewer grates. A neat row of dump trucks awaiting loads of snow from a rotor caused us to detour around the small town they were clearing.

This morning, we Jengaed our ski gear into the trunk and parked next to a similar road cut that towered nearly 10 feet over our little hybrid. In front of us, Yuki's lime-green Honda Element is neatly packed with a towel, onsen kit and pair of touring skis.

When we reach our goal ridge, a steep, white face comes in and out of view as the clouds shift and reform. We could go higher, but not today. This ridge is our highpoint. It's a contrary thought to the Teton ethics that I'm used to, where the goal is a summit. But here, our goal is the classic powder skiing Hokkaido is known for. The face above us is windswept and, without trees, the flat light leaves little definition.

Instead, we transition on the ridge. The plan is to lap the birch-lined hallways, moving slightly left or right each time, and then follow the trench-like skinner back up. I take care to keep my pack closed as I rip skins and swap a trucker's hat for a helmet and goggles.

We give Yuki first tracks, and she turns into a blur of purple and white. When it's my turn to drop in, I feel like I'm drowning. Snow rips over my face in the first turn. If I wasn't still moving, I might think I was being slowly buried. With my mask around my neck, not over my face, low-density flakes fill my mouth and throat. I stop, cough up water and pull my Buff up.

On take two, I breathe through my nose and whoop as I glide toward Yuki. I'm not choking anymore, but a new challenge emerges: Each turn I make leaves a cloud of snow hanging in the air, temporarily blinding me to the many birches native to Hokkaido. I mark the trees ahead of me at each exit in an attempt to steer clear. I feel just as weightless as those suspended flakes. This is that flow state you hear about, moving both with and independently of Earth's gravity. It's like flying.

After several more runs, Yuki declares that it's time for lunch, but not the frozen onigiris that Iz and I stocked up on at Seven-Eleven. She's taking us to her favorite restaurant before sending us to a proper onsen. We gorge ourselves on fish and noodles with a side of green tea at a quiet restaurant across from yet another Seven-Eleven. The afternoon is spent meditating in sulfur-scented hot water.

We quickly settle into this cycle: deep powder, good food, healing onsens. With endless backcountry zones and daily powder refills, we're never stressed about finding fresh tracks. It's obvious why Hokkaido has become the go-to powder skiing destination for the rest of the world.

EZO

140 million years ago-1900

RING OF FIRE

On our last day in Niseko, Iz and I follow local telemark skier Diana Rivera Garcia up the skintrack of Shiribetsudake (3,632'). It's the southernmost of the Niseko volcano chain and, according to HokkaidoWilds.org, it's known for both its dry, deep snow and for being "a melting pot of every sort of avalanche you'll encounter in Hokkaido, all in one convenient package." We find the snow, breaking a sometimes knee-deep trail over an old track, and Diana points out gullies, terrain traps and steep shots that we'll need to avoid on our descent.

Iz and I have been touring around Niseko for five days, and today is the first blue sky we've encountered. Otherwise, it's been a snow globe punctuated by constantly cleaning off the soybean, hiking in full Gore-Tex and, of course, legendary Hokkaido powder turns. Finally seeing the landscape around us is like waking up to a new, old-growth tree in your backyard. Shocking, but not unwanted.

From the northside of Shiribetsudake, we peer over our shoulders, through the birch trees, to Mount Yōtei (6,194'). Forests cover the lower flanks of the conical volcano, and its bare, white summit ends in what appears to be a flat top from our angle, but is actually a 2,000-foot-wide crater that last erupted in 1050 B.C.E.

Home to over 50 other volcanoes and countless hot springs, Hokkaido is a geologic hot spot. It's a part of the Ring of Fire—a horseshoe tracing the Pacific where 90% of the world's earthquakes occur—and sits at the juncture of four tectonic plates: The North American Plate, Pacific Plate, Eurasian Plate and Philippine Plate.

About 140 million years ago, the North American Plate and the Eurasian Plate began pushing towards each other. As they moved, an island formed on each of them—Old West Land and Old Okhotsk Land. Over 100 million years, these two formations crept closer to one another until, 40 million years ago, they collided to create Hokkaido. Later, the Pacific Plate pushed north, causing the island's spine to thrust into the air and create the eastern Hidaka Mountains, Hokkaido's only glaciated peaks.

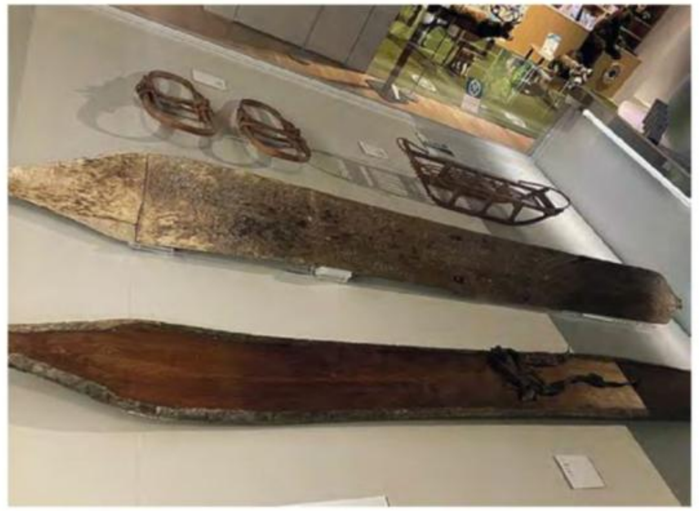
As the plates continued to shift, the Ezo Stratum group formed. The chain of stratovolcanoes, including Yōtei and Shiribetsudake, stretches from Urakawa in the south to the northern tip of Hokkaido and even into the Russian Kuril Islands.

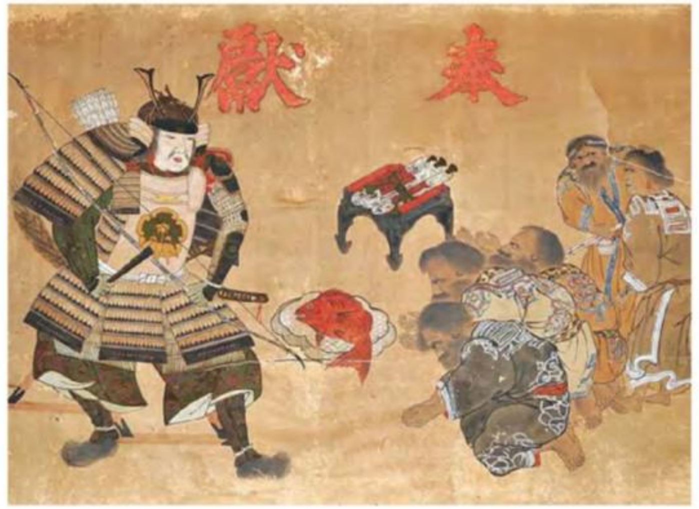
Shiribetsudake hasn't erupted since the Pleistocene Era, lucky for us since we're standing on top of it. Wind howls as we ascend the bare summit ridge, and Diana points out a cornice for us to avoid. A lenticular cloud has settled on the top of Yōtei and clings to the crater despite the gale. To the south is Lake Tōya and its hilly island, Nakanoshima. Past the lake is the Pacific Ocean. Northwest and out of sight is Daisetsuzan National Park, one of Japan's original national parks and home to the north island's highest peaks. It's also the next stop for Iz and I.

Our party drops back into the trees to transition. The wind coming off the ocean is too cold to linger in. As Diana rips her skins, she tells us about the Ainu, Hokkaido's native people.

"Did they have skis?" I ask her.

Diana lights up. "Of course," she exclaims. "Telemark skis!"





AINU

People first entered the Japanese Archipelago around 14,000 B.C.E. In his book *Hokkaido: A History of Japan's Northern Isle and its People*, Ibrahim Jalal writes, "Humans arrived in the Japanese archipelago via seven known routes: two from the sub-arctic, four from continental Asia, and one via the Pacific Ocean." Collectively, this group of migrants are known as the Jōmon. They were predominantly hunter-gatherers and inhabited both Hokkaido and Japan's main island of Honshu.

After 300 B.C.E., there was a split. Migrants from China and Korea began to push into Kyshu, Shikoku and Honshu, other islands in the Japanese archipelago. With them came agriculture, social hierarchies, warfare and the birth of the Wajin or Yamato cultures. Meanwhile, the Jōmon-descended Ainu continued their ancestor's hunter-gatherer traditions on Hokkaido.

By the 13th or 14th century, a small Yamato population was present on the southern peninsula of Hokkaido, but the Ainu remained culturally independent. They spoke their own language and, while Buddhism was the main Yamato religion, the Ainu believed that *kamuy* spirit deities were among them in the natural world.

In 1618, while Japan's Tokugawa Shogun was enforcing *Sakoku*—a series of isolationist policies—Hokkaido was an international hub, thanks to the Ainu. Sicilian missionary De Angeles visited Hokkaido and, according to Jalal, gave the first written description of the native people. "From the viewpoint of the Sicilian, the clothes of the Ainu resembled the garments of Muslims in nearby North Africa, noting the common use of geometrical patterns on the cloth," writes Jalal.

Ainu settlements lined lakes, rivers and the coast, including a stronghold in the Daisetsuzan Mountain Range in central Hokkaido. The range can receive 45 feet of snow each winter, which the Ainu needed to travel across.

While exploring Upopoy, the National Ainu Museum and Park on Hokkaido's southwest coast, I find a display with a dog sled, snowshoes and a pair of skis. The 130-millimeter-underfoot birch planks have seal-skin bases. A leather strap serves as a binding. As Diana said, there isn't anything to lock the heel down.

I think back to our run down Shiribetsudake. We hugged a ridge and made quick turns between the birch trees. While the snow was still deep, the sun and wind were starting to cause it to condense. I imagine an Ainu person riding these straight, beastly skis—fatter than anything I've ever ridden—down the same run, and my knees and quads hurt just thinking about the power it would take to push the tips around.

As the Ainu were exploring Daisetsuzan on skis, Honshu's political shifts were starting to wash up on Hokkaido's southern shores. The Edo government out of what is now Tokyo had been sending officials to lay claims in the north for centuries, but Hokkaido didn't officially join Japan until 1869. A year prior, the isolationist Tokugawa Shogun regime was overthrown and the new Emperor Meiji ushered in the Meiji Restoration, which brought a wave of industrialization and modernization to the country. This included renaming the island, which had been called Ezo, Ezogashima or Ezochi, roughly translating to "barbarians" or "land of the barbarians," to Hokkaido.

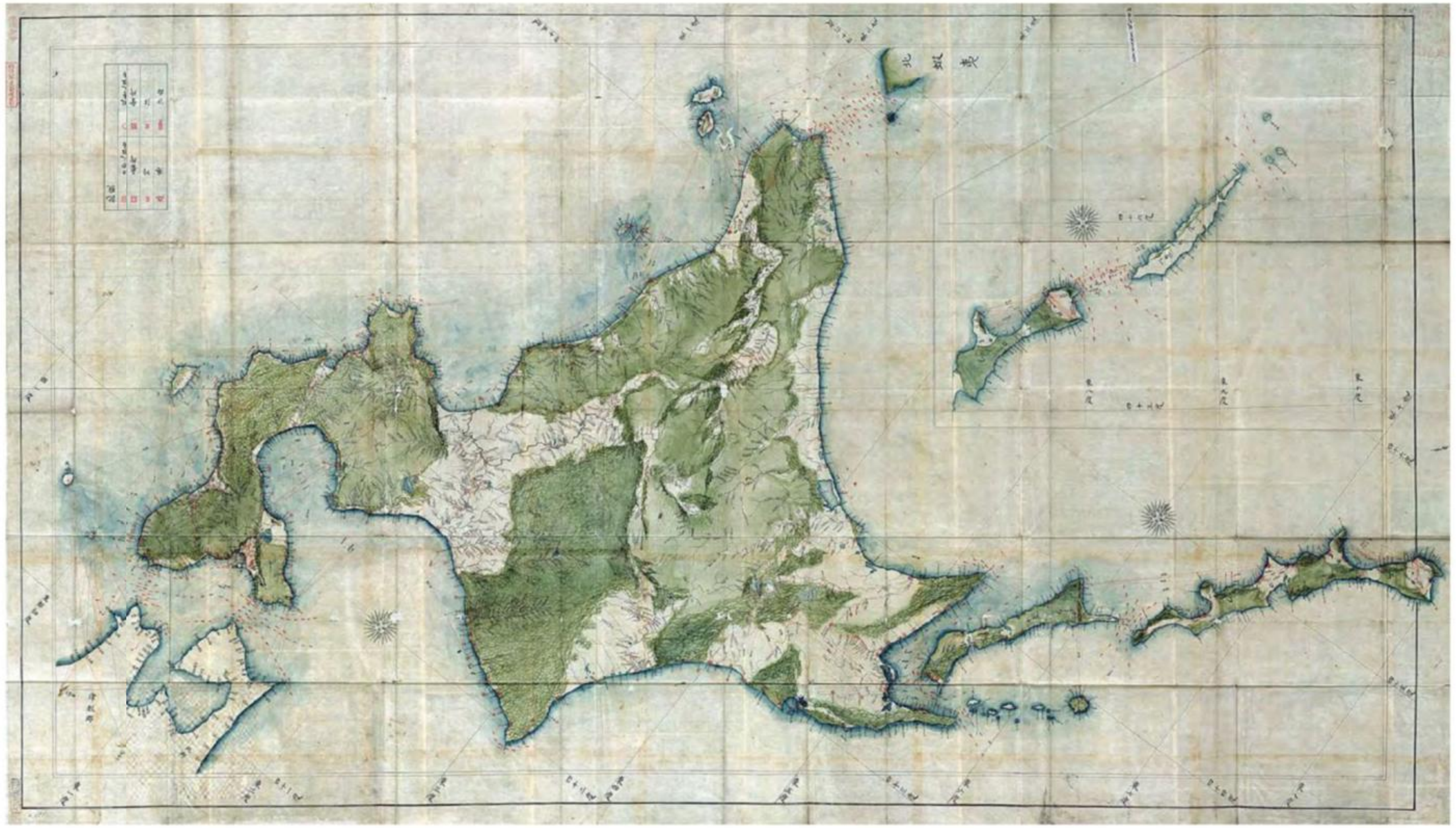
EUROPEAN INFLUENCE

1900-1939

THE FATHER OF JAPANESE SKIING

While the Ainu claim the first skis on Hokkaido, a series of European visitors are credited with bringing skiing to Japan's north island. First was Swiss Hans Koller, who was hired to teach German at Sapporo's Hokkaido University. Despite not knowing how to ski, Koller still brought a single pair of planks with him and taught himself to kick, glide and turn on the University's campus. Eventually, Koller taught his students, who commissioned their own skis from a local sleigh maker.

It was Major Theodor von Lerch, however, who had the largest impact on the development of skiing in Japan.



[Facing Page, Top] To travel around the island in the winter, Hokkaido's Ainu people created skis with seal skin bases. ⊡ **Betsy Manero**

[Facing Page, Bottom] Ainu garments mixed other cultures with their own beliefs, including the use of patterns to keep away evil spirits. A Samari interacts with Ainu circa 1775. ⊡ **Hakodate City Museum**

[Above] In 1828, while Japan was under *Sakoku* isolation policies, an official of the Astronomy Bureau of the Shogunate, Takahashi Sakuzaemon, was executed after giving a collection of maps—including this one of Hokkaido—to a visiting German doctor. ⊡ **Courtesy LOC**

[Left] Credited as the "Father of Japanese Skiing," Major Theodor von Lerch taught the sport to Japan's military in the winter of 1911/12.
Public Domain

[Right] Japanese ski troops practice Lerch's single pole technique in Honshu's Niigata Prefecture.
Heeresgeschichtliches Museum

[Facing Page] Ukichiro Nakaya's early images of snowflakes along with his lab-grown crystals changed the course of snow science.
Public Domain

Born in Austria-Hungary in 1869, the mustached military man learned to ski while stationed in Innsbruck and Vienna, taught by Mathias Zdarksy, who is credited as the "Father of Alpine Skiing." While teaching ski lessons in Tyrol in 1908, Lerch attended the World Art Exhibition in Dresden, Germany. Under the Japanese Pavilion, he studied images of pagodas and cherry blossoms.

Two years later, Lerch was sent to see those pagodas and cherry blossoms in person. Against all odds, Japan had won the Russo-Japanese War, and the Austria-Hungary military wanted to know how. Lerch's mission was to gather intelligence and report back, but, while visiting the War Ministry in Tokyo in November 1910, his ski ability came up. During a training exercise in 1902, over 200 members of the 5th Regiment had been pinned down by a snowstorm in the Hakkōda Mountains. The men were unable to travel through the deep snow and froze to death. Skis would have made a difference, and Lerch was asked to teach the Japanese military to ski.

Lerch first went to the Niigata Prefecture, where he taught the 58th to ski. Then, in early 1912, he was sent to Hokkaido, where he began instructing the 7th Regiment in Asahikawa and Kutchan. Soldiers were outfitted with skis made in Tokyo, modeled after the two pairs Lerch brought with him from Europe.

On the slopes above Kutchan, just north of Niseko, Lerch demonstrated the techniques he had learned from Zdarsky. One leg forward, heels down and holding a bamboo pole for control. He spoke French and Capt. Juhachi Yamaguchi translated to Japanese. "Mettre ski!" was reportedly his most common instruction, which translates to, "Put your skis on!"

According to Kyūya Fukada, author of the book *One Hundred Mountains in Japan*, Lerch even attempted to ski Mount Yōtei. Nine soldiers from the 7th Division and a journalist joined him. "However, he did not reach the top," writes Fukada. Cold weather and blowing snow turned the party around. Fukada mentions that a ski descent from the summit of Mount Yōtei wouldn't be made for another five years but doesn't specify who was in the party.

Lerch left Japan that fall, but his legacy remained. He was awarded the Order of the Rising Sun by the Japanese Military and presented with a Katana sword, inscribed, "Present to Lieutenant Colonel Lerch from Austria." Today, Lerch is known as the "Father of Japanese Skiing." Several statues of him stand on Hokkaido, including one in Kutchan and one in Asahikawa. In both, Lerch is cast in bronze, skis strapped to his feet with a single pole in hand.

DYNAMIC MOUNTAINEERING

Skinning along the western ridge of Tokachidake (6,814'), I look over my shoulder to see the Ryounkaku, the small hotel that is our home for the next few nights, far below. A little amber pool steams at the backdoor before the slope pitches down several hundred feet to the river below. Across the valley is the Tokachi Range, which make up the southern mountains of Daisetsuzan National Park. Unlike the cratered and flat-topped mountains around Niseko, these are sharp. Pointed summits descend into steep, rocky couloirs. Drainages are stepped by dams, and not too far above the hotel's 4,000-foot perch, the treeline ends. Two-thousand feet higher and you hit the tallest summits on Hokkaido: Asahidake (7,516'), Tokachidake and Tomuraushi (7,025'), all of which are within the national park.

During this leg of the journey, Iz and I are joined by my partner, Mike Parri. From the wind-swept ridge, the three of us look up at Tokachidake. The Styrofoam-like snow continues to the summit. Rocky patches pepper the otherwise white cone. While exploring a new-to-us zone, we've had the mindset of skinning to what looks good and turning around when it feels bad. As we top out on a crater, the wind rips through our shells, and breaking trail changes from pushing aside low-density snow to cracking through wind buff. It's officially bad.

Instead of the summit, we opt to lap the protected west crater. Mike drops first and points out a sulfurous steam vent to avoid. It's a reminder that this volcano—like many others on the island—is active. Tokachidake's 1926 eruption caused snowmelt-induced landslides that wreaked havoc, destroying buildings, plowing through fields and killing 144 people. Since then, it's had two other major eruptions in 1962 and 1988.

"For me, Tokachi-dake is first and foremost a ski mountain," Fukada writes in *One Hundred Mountains of Japan*. "Before the war, you had to endure four and a half hours in a horse-drawn sledge to get there from Kami-furano. Now, travelling in Hokkaidō has taken off."

For Mike, Iz and I, the open bowls with relatively sheltered snow confirm that it's a skier's mountain. But, unlike prewar alpinists, we had just a 40-minute drive from Furano, granted some of the switchbacks were a little spicy in last night's snowstorm. This zone is also

UKICHIRO NAKAYA: LETTERS FROM HEAVEN

LIAM MCGEE

One tiny, yet beautifully intricate, snowflake balanced delicately on a single strand of rabbit hair lining the hood of his coat—or maybe it was his assistant's coat. Many details of Ukichiro Nakaya's breakthrough discovery have been lost to the fog of time. What's clear is that, on March 12, 1936, Nakaya succeeded in creating the first artificial snowflake in a lab just outside of Sapporo.

It had taken almost four years of careful observation, inspecting the snow crystals that buried Sapporo in almost 20 feet of snow each winter, for Nakaya to take the first step in defining snow science as we understand it today. A professor of physics at the University of Hokkaido, Nakaya's quest to unravel the "problem" of snow was an amalgamation of his endless curiosity, rigorous scientific training and severe shortage of lab equipment for his small physics department. Trained as a nuclear physicist at Tokyo Imperial University, Nakaya was hired by the University of Hokkaido as a professor in 1930, aged just 30, when their Department of Sciences was established. Undeterred by his lack of equipment to study nuclear physics, Nakaya soon turned his attention to the as-yet-mystery of the crystalline flakes dancing outside the windows of his classroom and piling up in double- and triple-overhead snowbanks across the city.

Unlike many purveyors of snow today, Nakaya's interest was purely scientific. Likely inspired by Wilson Bentley's 1931 book *Snow Crystals*, in which the American photographer captured over 3,000 photographs of perfectly symmetrical snowflakes, Nakaya saw an opportunity to expand on Bentley's work. In his own seminal book, *Snow Crystals: Natural and Artificial*, Nakaya recognizes Bentley's contribution as a great inspiration, but notes, "As scientific material, it is regrettable that his pictures were retouched and were published without details of magnifications."

A year after Bentley's book was published, Nakaya began taking photos of snow crystals in his lab in Sapporo. Hunched over a microscope, he would quickly snap photomicrographs (photos taken through a microscope using a light filter) of individual flakes of snow, categorizing them by shape and formation. A year later, he moved himself to the forested hillside of the volcanic Tokachidake to study at Hakugi-sō (Silvery Villa). With that, his track from nuclear physics to snow crystals was set in ice.

Despite his growing catalog of snowflakes, Nakaya's mountainside observations could only take him so far. Unable to access the clouds where the flakes were formed, Nakaya realized he needed a lab to simulate meteorological conditions on the ground. The University of Hokkaido obliged his request for a cold room and began construction of the Low Temperature Laboratory (which would later become the Institute of Low Temperature Sciences). The lab, completed in February 1936, was crucial in Nakaya revolutionizing the world of snow science—beginning with that first artificial snowflake balancing on a strand of rabbit hair.

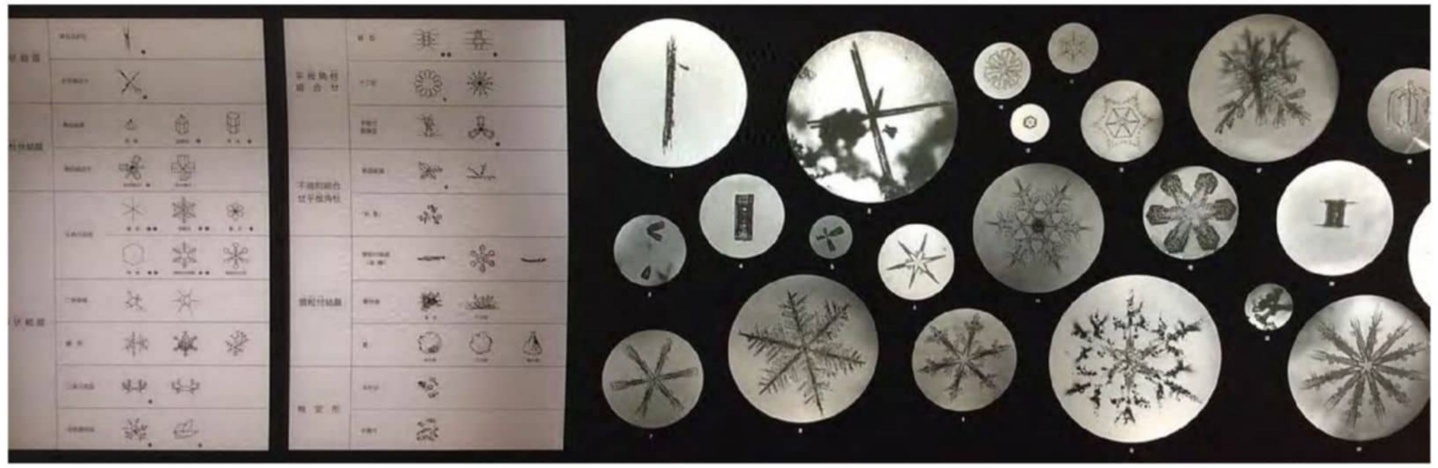
Over the following years, Nakaya and his team went on to categorize the temperature and saturation that created different types of snow, an endeavor that ultimately ended with the Nakaya Diagram. This chart, showing temperature on the x-axis and supersaturation on the y-axis, is artfully adorned with different variations of snow crystals. Almost a century later, the hand-drawn diagram remains familiar to many who have taken an Avalanche Level 1 course or studied snow crystals in depth.

Amongst all the science, Nakaya never forgot about the beauty that inspired his work. In a 1939 film on his work, also titled *Snow Crystals*, Nakaya called "each snowflake a letter sent from heaven." It was a phrase he restated in his book and in many essays over his lifetime.

While poetic verses and snow science may have been his calling, the Japanese scientist was inevitably drawn into the war effort. Nakaya shortly experimented on icing and fogging in Japanese planes, working to find methods to artificially dissipate moisture in aircrafts. All the while, he continued finalizing *Snow Crystals: Natural and Artificial*. Nakaya notes in the book's introduction that printing was making "slow but steady process under the adverse conditions of the War, when unfortunately the printing office was bombed and the whole copper type and original type of the text were burnt."

In 1940, Nakaya was awarded the Imperial Academy Prize for his visionary diagram. International acclaim soon followed. In 1949, he was consulted in the creation of the Snow, Ice, and Permafrost Research Establishment by the U.S. Army (now known as the Cold Regions Research Engineering Laboratory). Nakaya was then contracted as a scientist there from 1952 to 1954. His research took him to Hawaiian peaks and eventually to Greenland, where he spearheaded early investigations of ice cores for climatic research.

In 1962, after a decade of work in Greenland, Nakaya passed away following a battle with cancer. His work, both in snow and ice, laid the foundation for climate and snow science as we know it, but maybe more importantly, his careful, contemplative study percolates through history. "My father, Ukichiro Nakaya, made the first artificial snow crystal," writes his daughter, Fujiko Nakaya. "He used to say, 'You must listen to ice if you want to learn about ice.' He always said that you have to be humble, surrender to nature in order for nature to speak."



MAP
RAILWAY LINES
HOKKAIDO
北海道
鐵道線路圖

[From Left to Right] Itakura Katsunobu and the founding members of Hokkaido University's Academic Alpine Club are responsible for many first descents on Hokkaido. **Academic Alpine Club of Hokkaido**

An 1897 map of Hokkaido shows the rail lines around the island. The railroad company would go on to invest in ski tourism throughout the 20th century. **David Rumsey Map Collection**

Pictured in 1929, the Helvetia Hütte (left) and Soranuma Hütte (right) were part of a European-inspired chain of huts built in the late '20s and early '30s. **Academic Alpine Club of Hokkaido**

accessible via public transportation. A bus will take you all the way to the Ryounkaku. And the train has been running to Furano since 1912, which is where early mountaineers would transfer from railcars to those horse-drawn sledges to get into the mountains.

While skiing for recreation wasn't popularized until Lerch, Japanese mountain climbing has a been around for centuries. Buddhist monks have been building shrines on top of sacred peaks for over 1,200 years. On Hokkaido, Yōtei's first recorded ascent was Matsuura Takeshirō, who intended to build a shrine on the mountain in 1858. "Ample proof that Takeshirō really did reach the top is found in his description of the summit as hollowed out, like that of Fuji, with a crater some 1.5 leagues across (this is somewhat exaggerated)," writes Fukada.

Then, British missionary Walter Weston introduced recreational alpine climbing in Honshu's Alps starting in 1888. In 1905, the Japanese Alpine Club was founded, and Japanese mountaineers began making winter ascents on Honshu.

"A cursory survey of Japanese mountaineering literature reveals the centrality of the Alps to the development of the sport throughout the pre-war period," writes David A. Fedman in his paper "Mounting Modernization: Itakura Katsunobu, the Hokkaido University Alpine Club and Mountaineering in Pre-War Hokkaido," which is the culmination of his year on a Fullbright scholarship studying mountaineering history in Hokkaido between 2008 and 2009. "This study, however, contends that beginning in the late 1920s, the nexus of cutting-edge mountaineering shifted to Hokkaido's remote backcountry ridges, as Japanese climbers began to experiment with and refine expeditionary climbing in places like the Daisetsuzan and Hidaka ranges."

One of the mountaineers on the forefront of Hokkaido exploration was Itakura Katsunobu, son of a former *daimyo*, a feudal lord title that was abolished under the Meiji Restoration. Katsunobu learned to climb in the European Alps under Austrian mountaineer Leopold Winkler. Upon returning to Japan, he partook in a series of impressive climbs in the Japanese Alps and was invited to join the prestigious Japanese Alpine Club. In 1919, he enrolled in Hokkaido University's geography department.

"In Hokkaido… the onset of summit-oriented mountaineering—as opposed to forays into the mountains for practical endeavors such as hunting, foraging, or surveying—did not come until the late 1910s, an indication of both the difficulty of Hokkaido's still inaccessible alpine terrain and, perhaps more importantly, of its place outside of the cultural sphere of Tokyo and the influence of the 'small cadre of cosmopolitan climbers' identified as the catalysts of Meiji mountaineering," Fedman writes. "In other words, prior to the arrival of Itakura, Hokkaido's peaks remained on the periphery of the Japanese alpine imagination, despite the government's comprehensive effort to hem the island into the cultural fabric of modern Japan."

Upon arrival to Hokkaido, Katsunobu joined the university's ski club, which was founded in 1912. It didn't take long before he and a small group of more adventurous club members saw the potential to use skis to access some of Hokkaido's more remote mountaineering objectives.

According to Fedman, another Japanese Alpine Club member, Maki "Yūkō" Aritsune, provided mountaineering gear from Switzerland, and Katsunobu shared his wealth of mountaineering knowledge. On top of skiing and mountaineering skills, the students learned to read a map, were taught basic wilderness survival skills and partook in regular exercise programs. These efforts culminated in a series of winter ascents, starting in January 1922, when four members made the first winter ascent of Asahidake, Hokkaido's highest peak.

Starting with his winter ascents in the Japanese Alps, Katsunobu's climbing style was described as "dynamic mountaineering," mixing crampons, skis and rock climbing. Today, we'd call it ski mountaineering, but in the deep drifted snow of Hokkaido, the boards were simply a necessity for travel. And it spurred the need for better tools. According to Fedman, "The advent of dynamic mountaineering marked not only the transition to winter season mountaineering, but also the incorporation of various climbing tools including the multi-loop harness, a crude prototype of the ice screw, and mountaineering boots capable of interchanging between skis and crampons."

Katsunobu died in a mountaineering accident in 1924. While climbing with Aritsune, the two became separated in a white out, and Katsunobu succumbed to exposure. Two years later, his contemporaries at Hokkaido University founded the Academic Alpine Club, which continued to push mountaineering and backcountry skiing across the island, including an annual training camp on Tokachidake, the same peak Iz, Mike and I skied.

"This slew of audacious yet successful climbs ushered in an era of winter expedition-style alpinism that can only be described as a tour de force: during the two decades to follow the club tallied over 100 first winter season ascents as the premier—and virtually sole—institution mounting winter climbs in Hokkaido," writes Fedman.

ACADEMIC PURSUITS

"It's not trivial that they call themselves the Academic Alpine Club," Fedman tells me in an interview. "They saw those two facets of what they were doing as inextricably linked. A big part of why we climb and why we mount these big, dangerous expeditions is to advance science as well as the sport of mountaineering."

Reaching summits went hand-in-hand with collecting data to be taken back to the university for further study. And it helped the club's image. This was still a time when modernization demanded purpose for endeavors, especially dangerous ones. In 1940, an Academic Alpine Club expedition was buried in an avalanche while attempting a winter ascent of Petegaridake. Only one team member, Uchida Takehiko, survived. Climbing was in the national eye thanks to publications like the Japanese Alpine Club's *Sangaku*, which meant accidents like this one were put in the spotlight.

"Certainly, when you start to have this wave of deaths and alpine accidents that capture the public attention, there are unsettling questions about the future of the sport and whether or not it's a worthy endeavor. I think science is a big part of how they framed it and sold it to the public, and certainly how institutionally they sold themselves to Hokkaido University, that this was an esteemed, scientific enterprise, as much as it was a bunch of kids wanting to climb mountains," says Fedman.

Today, the Academic Alpine Club is one of several outdoor clubs at the University of Hokkaido. The Wandervogel Club—which is currently celebrating its 70th anniversary—and the Ski Club that Katsunobu originally joined still operate. The three clubs are also responsible for operating another piece of ski history: a series of European-style huts constructed in the mountains between Sapporo and Otaru in the 1920s and '30s.

"The Ministry of Railways (formerly the Japanese National Railways) devised a plan to attract more skiers in order to increase railway usage. During the same period, there was a strong demand in Sapporo for a mountain hut to serve as a base for ski mountaineering," Kyoka Into, a member of the Wandervogel Club, tells me via email. "This led to an initiative, primarily driven by faculty members of Hokkaido University, to build ski huts around Sapporo that could facilitate ski tours and to connect them. This concept was called the Hütten Kette ('chain of mountain huts')."

Twenty were originally built. Now, the university clubs manage five of the remaining huts, the oldest of which is the Paradise Hütte, constructed in 1926 to commemorate the 15th anniversary of the Hokkaido University Ski Club.

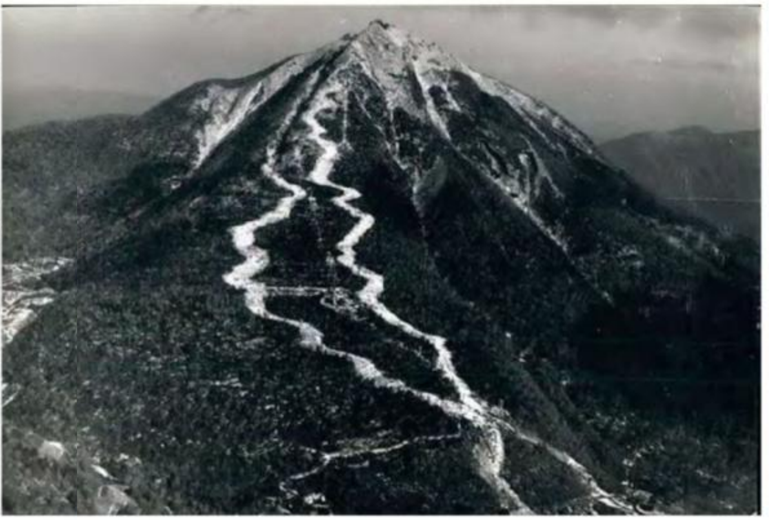
A year after Paradise Hütte's construction, two university professors and a Swiss architect built the Helvetia Hütte. When one of the professors, Arnold Gubler moved from Switzerland to Japan to teach at the University of Sapporo in 1923, he brought his skis and his wife, Madeline, with him. The couple missed the Alps, but the snowy slopes of Hokkaido were balm to their homesickness. In 1927, Gubler teamed up with architect Max Hinder and fellow professor Haruo Yamasaki to build the Helvetia Hütte.

The Hütte is a mix of Japanese and European design. Hinder, after all, was a European architect who spent most of his career designing hospitals, schools and ski huts in Japan, including the Paradise Hütte. A peaked roof is made of cypress wood shingles. Classic red and white stripes adorn the door and shutters and there's even an edelweiss above the entrance. It sits on stilts to accommodate deep winters and has a pleasing symmetrical shape.

In 1928, Prince Chichibu came to Sapporo for a royal visit, and the Soranuma Hut—also designed by Hinder—was built in his honor. As the emperor's second son, Prince Chichibu focused on international relations and pursued athletics, including skiing. The experience reportedly inspired him to say, "If Japan were to hold a Winter Olympics in the future, Sapporo would be the best suited as its snow is the superior quality and it is a university town."

Next, the Sapporo Railway Bureau built their own hut, Okuteineyama, or the Mountain House, between the Helvetia and Paradise huts. The company had a vested interest in promoting winter tourism in Hokkaido. Afterall, rail was the predominant form of transportation. The Sapporo Railway Bureau had also founded Niseko Grand Hirafu Resort—the original Niseko ski resort—in 1923.

[From Left to Right] Prince Chichibu visits the Soranuma Hütte in 1928. **Academic Alpine Club of Hokkaido**



While two ski runs were blazed on Mount Eniwa for the 1972 Olympic downhill, restoration efforts have left the trails barely visible. **Keystone Pictures USA/Alamy**

LIFE
OLYMPICS
The leap for gold at Sapporo

John Dominis' photo of Yukio Kasaya on his way to winning gold at the 1972 Olympics ran as the cover of *Life* magazine. **Courtesy Life Magazine**

Kasaya (center) on the podium with silver medalist Akitsugu Konno (left) and bronze medalist Seiji Aochi (right). **JIJI Press**

Construction of Okuteine-yama was completed in December 1930, and the official opening was held the following month. Guests enjoyed luxurious accommodations, at least by the standards of pre-war backcountry cabins. The three-story building could hold up to 80 people and had lights mounted to the roof for night skiing. Meals were available upon request from the hut keeper, who cooked over a massive woodstove. Bedding was provided, and a railway telephone line ran from the nearby Zenibako Station to the hut. According to the Hokkaido University Wandervogel Club's website, "There were signs leading to the hut from each station, so it was apparently fully booked every week."

As the huts were built, the Academic Alpine Club continued to climb and ski peaks around Hokkaido. Single objectives turned to traverses and gear was fine-tuned and improved. Simultaneously, winter tourism in Hokkaido grew. Prince Chichibu's prediction even came true when Sapporo won the bid for the 1940 Winter Olympics.

But they weren't to be. Global conflict brewed, leading to the Sino-Japanese War and World War II. Japan yielded the Olympics to St. Moritz, Switzerland, in 1938. The games were later transferred to Germany before being cancelled entirely.

War halted the popularity of skiing in Japan, including within the Academic Alpine Club. Club members were drafted, and the few remaining members only averaged three climbs per year. "Indeed, mountaineering clubs throughout the country were forced to cut back (or, in some cases, halt entirely) their alpine activities through the war years," writes Fedman. "The development and evolution of Japanese mountaineering was thus suspended until the Himalayan big peak explosion that came nearly a decade after surrender."

THE SKI BOOM

1946-1998

THE OLYMPIC EFFECT

Clouds circle the summit of Asahidake. Mike and I were waiting for clear skies, but on our last day of skiing it's still overcast and snowing. The snow is good, but it's also obscuring the fumaroles that line Asahidake's upper flanks, making a summit attempt impossible. And we're missing the view.

"The sight of Asahi-dake towering overhead is incomparably beautiful," reads Fukada's Diasetsuzan entry in *One Hundred Mountains of Japan.* He later adds of the range, "Just one of these high plateaus would be famous if transported to Honshū, but here they seem to be scattered carelessly around the landscape. The Diasetsuzan's charm is rooted in this boundless generosity of scale."

We might not be able to see the peaks that inspired Fukada, but one last powder day is a welcome consolation prize.

The road we drove this morning is much like the one to the Ryounkaku in the southern half of Diasetsuzan National Park. But today, we're in the northern part of the park. High snowbanks curve around sharp switchbacks. Conifers line the way. Some sections are less than plowed. Onsens and hostels pop up every few miles as we approach the tramway. It strikes me how this hot water is a welcome, après ski treat, but the sulfurous steam coming out of the fumaroles are a dangerous obstacle to be avoided.

The base station for the Asahidake Tramway includes a gift shop with national park souvenirs and a cafeteria, where ramen costs 400 yen (roughly $2.50 USD). Another 1,500 yen (or about $9.50 USD) buys a one-way ticket up the tram. Mike and I pack into the box with our friends Katie Botwin, Drew Zieff and Jed Doane along with 100 other excited skiers. Ten minutes later, we're hurrying through biting wind from the platform into the warming shelter to gear up before our descent.

This isn't really a ski resort—not in the traditional sense. Only single-ride tickets are available, and that will get you halfway up Asahidake. Four "courses" are minimally marked and sometimes groomed. There's no ski patrol. It's mostly a backcountry playground with a convenient lift and restaurant to refuel at in between runs.

The tramway was originally built in 1968, during a boom in lift development. Hokkaido's first chairlift was built in 1946 at Moiwayama outside of Sapporo, and skiing quickly came back into popularity. "Businesses soon saw that potential and began to develop mountainsides in Honshu and Hokkaido," writes Andrew Lea, owner of SnowJapan.com. Lea moved to Japan in 1992 and has spent the years since cataloging the country's past and present ski areas. "Ski areas suddenly appeared all over Japan, and some of today's best resorts had their beginnings around that time."

Lea lists around 30 ski areas in Japan operating in 1955. By 1965, that number climbed to almost 200. Economic growth in the 1960s brought money into Japan, which was put into updated facilities and new resorts. This included Niseko Kogen Kanko lifts, which built the first lifts on what is now Niseko United, a group of five independent but interconnected ski resorts on Mount Annupuri (4,292'). Four years later, the St. Mortiz Lift Co. opened and continued building chairlifts at Niseko.

Another driving factor in skiing's popularity was Chiharu 'Chick' Igaya. Twenty-eight years after Japan entered its first winter Olympics in 1928, Igaya brought home the country's first winter medal when he took silver in slalom at the 1956 Cortina Games. Igaya became a national hero, and the number of city dwellers escaping to the slopes for weekends and holidays swelled.

With skiing's popularity on the rise, a bid was put in for the 1968 Games. Japan was eliminated in the first round of voting, and Grenoble, France, was eventually selected as the host.

The committee tried again for the 1972 Games. Due to lung cancer, Japan's International Olympic Committee member Shingoro Takaishi was unable to attend the 1966 Olympic session, where the fate of the games was decided. Takaishi made an appeal for Sapporo to be selected from his deathbed. The plea worked, and Japan received 32 of the 62 votes in the first round. Takaishi died a year later, but he passed knowing that Sapporo would host the 1972 Winter Games.

To prepare for their Olympics, the Japanese Government spent an estimated $500 million USD on upgrades. Stadiums were built, ski trails blazed, lifts constructed, and a new subway system was installed below Sapporo. This would be the first Winter Games held in Asia, and the Japanese aimed to impress.

Perhaps one of the largest projects was constructing a downhill course. While Mount Teine (3,357') in Sapporo would host the slalom and GS races, there wasn't a suitable location to build such a long run in the city. The organizers looked south to Mount Eniwa (4,331'). The peak was high enough for the race, but the land was within Shikotsu Toya National Park. No infrastructure existed and there was opposition from both conservation groups and the Ministry of Public Welfare, which manages Japan's national parks.

Eventually a deal was struck. A 31-person aerial tram, ski lift, helipad and men's and women's downhill courses could be built, but everything had to be dismantled after the Olympics. Construction began in 1968.

"Numerous challenges and setbacks were overcome, and construction was completed in January 1970, with the ski runs ready for use the following month," Lea writes on SnowJapan.com. The course had to be adjusted after an initial race was held in February 1971. Then, 1972, the year of the Games, was unseasonably warm. Approximately 4,500 truckloads of snow had to be brought in, and 300 Japanese troops were camped at the base of the venue, tasked with packing the snow into place.

The event itself happened without a hitch, with Switzerland sweeping both the men's and women's gold. Then, it was time to dismantle everything. The Japanese government spent 160 million yen (around $4 million in today's USD) taking out the lifts and replanting trees. According to Lea, "Nearly 50 years later, the outline of the ski runs can just about be made out on aerial images—if you know where to look."

While Japan didn't have a repeat of their alpine skiing silver—or any ski racing medals—they swept the podium of the men's individual ski jump.

Expectations were high for Yukio Kasaya, Akitsugu Konno, Seiji Aochi and Takashi Fujisawa, the four Japanese men competing in the ski jump. Kasaya was considered a heavy favorite. He had claimed second in the 1970 World Championships and won three competitions during the '71/72 season leading up to the Sapporo Olympics. Now, Hokkaido-born Kasaya was on his home turf. Cheered by the tens of thousands of spectators gathered at Miyanomori just outside of Sapporo, he took an early lead when he jumped an impressive 84 meters in the first round. The three other members of the Japanese team scored close behind Kasaya, and their squad held the top four spots.

Kasaya held his lead through the entire competition. When the powder cloud settled, he was awarded Japan's first ever Winter Olympic gold. Aochi and Akitsugu scored second and third respectively, giving the host country a clean sweep of the podium. The trio was nicknamed the Hinomaru Hikotai, or Rising Sun Squadron.

Like Igaya, Kasaya was rocketed to ski stardom. He appeared on the February 1972 cover of *Life* magazine. After his retirement in 1976, he served as an International Olympic Committee delegate and headed up the ski jumping branch of the All Japan Ski Federation. In his obituary in *The Japan Times*, Japanese Olympic Committee Vice President Yuko Mitsuya was quoted saying, "Kasaya laid the foundation for the success of many athletes who have gone on to the present day."

Asia's first Winter Olympics were considered a massive success, and the local area benefited greatly. New venues, including the ski jump, allowed young athletes to train at world-class facilities and made Sapporo eligible to host future international competitions. With a global spotlight and a growing Japanese ski obsession, Hokkaido was primed for the ski boom.

BOOMS

At the start of the 1980s, Japan's economy was booming. The manufacturing industry was selling at an all-time high, unemployment was low, and the yen was strong. Consumers were looking to spend their excess money. Media like the 1987 ski romcom *Watashi Wo ski Ni Tsuretette*, or *Take Me out to the Snowland* brought skiing into mainstream media.

"Attractive new ski areas started to appear at an astonishing rate, and existing facilities were either rebuilt or expanded," Lea writes on SnowJapan.com. "There was a period when there was a race to develop the biggest, longest and best of everything." He estimates that there were 530 ski areas operating in Japan by 1985, and over 100 additional areas were opened by 1990. At the peak of the ski boom in 1993, 18.6

YŪICHIRŌ MIURA: FIRST, FASTEST, HIGHEST

BY BETSY MANERO

On May 6, 1970, Yūichirō Miura clipped into his skis on the South Col of Mount Everest. His red helmet had an attached antenna and oxygen mask, two pieces of safety that would be crucial for what he was about to do. While his team of Sherpa and Japanese mountaineers watched from below, he considered the icy pitch he was about to ski.

"It is steep, an angle of 40 degrees, 45 in some places, an 8,000-foot wall of ice that doesn't even have a name. There are jutting rocks the size of a four-story building. And at the bottom, the deep dark voice of ice that is the bergschrund. This is not a world for human beings," Miura said in the 1975 Academy Award-winning documentary *The Man Who Skied Down Everest.*

Miura was born in 1932 in one of the snowiest cities in the world, northern Honshu's Aomori City. His father, Kenzo Miura, was a ski instructor and a mountain landscape photographer, making a life in the mountains inevitable for young Yūichirō. He started skiing competitively in elementary school and eventually enrolled at Hokkaido University where he could continue to peruse snow sports while studying.

While he dabbled in competition, even holding the world speed skiing record for a single day in 1964, ski mountaineering was his passion. He was a pioneer of skiing in the Hokkōda Mountains around his childhood home in Aomori. In April 1966, he made the first descent of Mount Fuji. His tactic was a daring one: He schussed straight down until he hit 93 miles per hour and then pulled a parachute to quickly dump speed. It worked, and it gained him an invite from New Zealand's Tourism board to ski the Tasman Glacier, the country's largest glacier. On the trip, Miura met Everest-first-ascensionist Sir Edmund Hillary and decided to make the famed peak his next goal. It should be noted that he planned to descend from the South Col, 2,000 feet below the summit.

It took Miura and his team—which included 800 porters—22 days to travel the 185 miles between Kathmandu and Everest Base Camp. At this point, a team of Sherpa and Japanese mountaineers began navigating the Khumbu Ice Fall, a treacherous 3-mile section of the mountain known for ever-shifting crevasses and dangerous avalanches. While his team was securing ladders and ropes through the ice fall, Miura dialed in his ski gear and made practice runs with his parachute on the nearby Shangri-la Glacier.

On April 5, the route through the Khumbu Ice Fall was established, and porters began carrying two tons of equipment up the mountain. Tragedy struck when a large portion of the route collapsed, killing six Sherpas. "They had no chance. I feel a hopeless anger. My anger expands into a great nothingness and sorrow comes like waves of the ocean into which you sink," Miura said of the accident in the documentary. He later added, "A shadow covers the expedition. How can I justify this adventure now? There can be no happy ending anymore, no matter what I do."

After questioning if he should continue, Miura decided it would be a disgrace to the Sherpas' memories to abandon the climb. He and his team continued to push upward. "After two hours, I felt the energy drain from my body as though a switch were turned off," Miura said of skiing at altitude. Videos of his turns at Camp Two are impressive, but, for his own safety, he chose to use oxygen higher on the mountain.

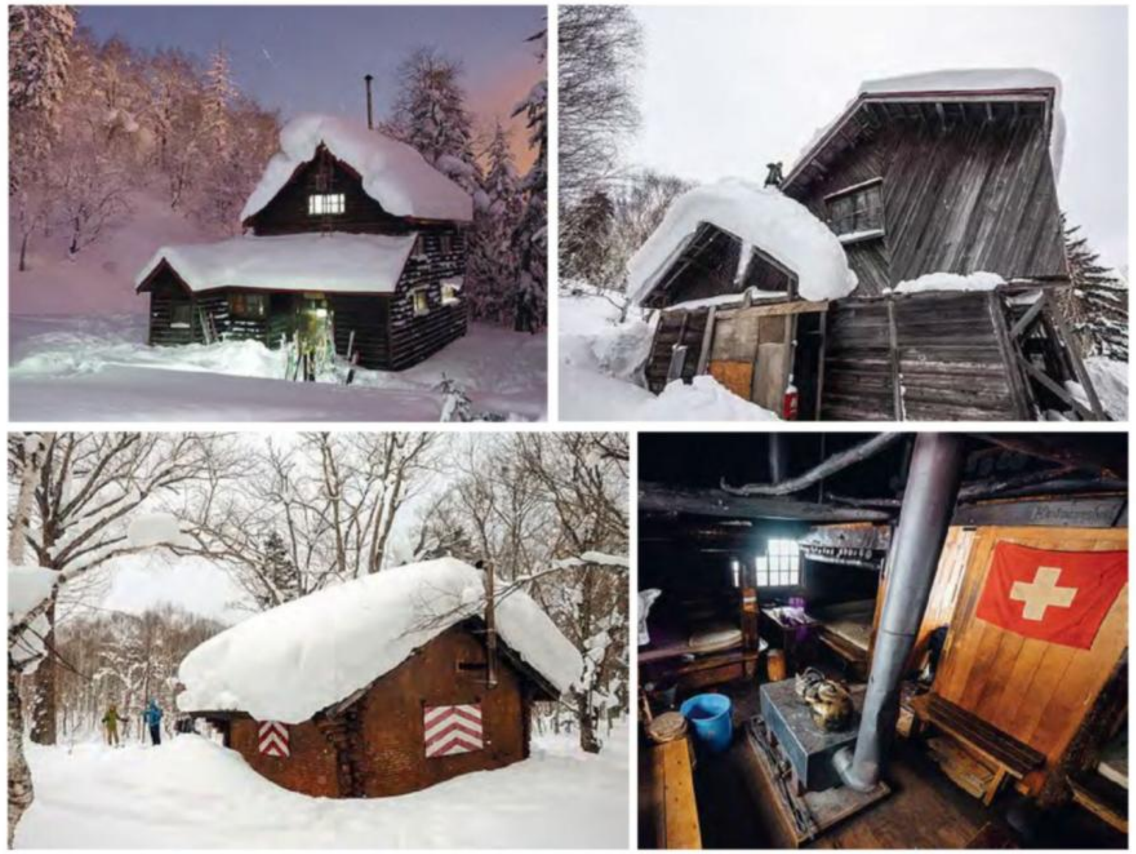
At Camp Four, Miura honored the six men lost in the Khumbu Ice Fall and waited for his weather window. When the winds died down, it was time for him to go. Cameramen slid into place. A final safety checklist was read through the transceiver in his helmet as he took mechanical breaths through his oxygen mask.

Then, Miura rolled over the edge in a straight line. Within six seconds, he was already going over 100 miles per hour. Much like on Fuji, his round, green and red parachute deployed behind him to control the speed. Partway down the hill, Miura fell, losing both his skis and tumbling over a small cliff band before he could self-arrest.

"The mountain seems to be falling over me. Can't hear the wind. No sound. White. Nothing. I wondered what it meant, being alive," Miura reflected in the film.

The 6,600-foot run, which took two minutes and 20 seconds, marked a change in the trajectory of ski mountaineering. Miura was the first person to ski on Mount Everest. New possibilities were opened, and daring skiers from future generations would start coming to Everest to follow in Miura's ski tracks, some even dropping from the summit.

But Miura had other goals. He'd already skied Mount Kosciusko, Australia's highest peak, and Mount Denali, North America's highest peak. With a partial descent of Everest also in the bag, he went on to ski the rest of the Seven Summits. Muira ticked off Kilimanjaro in 1981, a first descent of Vinson in 1983, and Elbrus and Aconcagua in 1985. Eventually, he did return to Everest. In 2003, he summited with his son, Olympic freestyle skier Gota Miura. At age 70, he became the oldest man to reach the top of the world. In typical Yūichirō Miura fashion, he went on the break his own record two more times at ages 75 and 80.



[Facing Page] In the documentary *The Man Who Skied Down Everest*, Yūichirō Miura descended from the South Col with a parachute in tow. ▣ **Courtesy Image Entertainment**

[Hut Photos, Clockwise from Top, Left] Okuteine-yama; Bankei-sanso Hut; Helvetia Hütte interior; Helvetia Hütte exterior. ▣ **Rob Thomson, all photos**

million people, or one out of every seven people living in Japan, were skiing at least once a year. Snowboarding's emergence that same year only boosted those numbers.

Hokkaido was also more accessible than ever to those living on Japan's other islands thanks to the Seikan Tunnel. Completed in 1988 after 24 years of construction, the tunnel connects the northern tip of Honshu to the southern tip of Hokkaido via train. For 14.5 miles, the tracks travel 330 feet below the seabed, making it the longest undersea tunnel in the world.

"In 1988, the *Hakutosei* sleeping car was added to the express train from Ueno to Sapporo (via the brand-new Seikan tunnel)," writes Kévin Tembouret in *Travelling by train in Japan: History of Japanese trains and rail tourism in the Land of the Rising Sun*. "A restaurant car (the *Grand Chariot*) was provided to offer full dinners by reservation only."

From Sapporo, tourists could take the train to Niseko. The Niseko Kogen Kanko and St. Moritz lift companies had both been operating resorts on the same mountain, Niseko Annupuri, for decades, but were now rapidly expanding with state-of-the-art gondolas and lodges. New resorts started to pop up, too. In 1972, a bus company opened Annupuri Ski Resort on the south side of the peak. Niseko Higashiyama (now Niseko Village) started 10 years later, and Hanazono was founded another decade after that in 1992. It wasn't long before four of the five resorts were available to ski on a single pass, which is now called Niseko United. (St. Moritz's Moiwa is still an independent pass.)

While resorts were on the rise, backcountry skiing was also having a comeback. The sport had dipped in popularity after WWII, and the Hütten Kette around Sapporo fell into disrepair. "After the war, the Okuteine-yama Hut continued its operations, but as ski resorts with ski lifts developed, the decline of ski mountaineering led to a decrease in visitors," Into from the Wandervogel Club tells me. Like Okuteine-yama, most of the huts were still operated by the railroad company, which was more focused on resort tourism than hut maintenance.

In 1971, Okuteine-yama was transferred to Hokkaido University and put under the management of the Wandervogel Club. By this point, the hut was falling into disrepair, and a 1980 survey revealed what the club describes as "an unexpected large number of groups" visiting. The university was willing to foot the bill for repairs, which were much needed as the hut was literally tilting to one side.

Okuteine-yama's renovation started in 1989. During the project, the foundation collapsed, injuring several club members. Over 50 tons of materials were brought in to fix the foundation and, two years after the project started, the hut had a new roof and exterior.

Other huts in the original Hütten Kette went through similar projects, some getting new roofs or updated amenities. Thanks to work from the Wandervogel Club, Academic Alpine Club, Ski Club and alumni groups, Hokkaido University students can still use the Okuteine-yama, Helvetia, Soranuma, Muine and Paradise huts to access ski destinations around Sapporo throughout the winter.

"For the members, the hut is a place to relax and deepen connections with fellow members, as well as a place where they can feel the weight of its long history. Through tasks like hut caretaking and carrying coal, members connect with the hut's history, and they share dreams around the stove," Into tells me of Okuteine-yama. "In a notebook provided at the hut, the thoughts of past members about the Wandervogel Club and the hut are written down. As a member who loves the hut, I hope to preserve this wonderful place inherited from our seniors and pass it down to future generations."

BUSTS

While skiers, huts and resorts enjoyed the economic boost of the ’80s, the ’90s were a different story. In 1991, sketchy loans issued with few restrictions by Japan’s banks began to be defaulted on, and the proverbial bubble burst. Japan entered what has been dubbed “The Lost Decades,” a period of economic stagnation that bled into 2008’s Great Recession.

The crash was slow to catch up with the ski industry, but eventually it did. Even Japan’s 1998 Nagano Winter Olympics couldn’t save the country’s dying resorts. According to SnowJapanHistory.com, where Lea catalogs the closed resorts of Japan, at least six ski resorts closed across the country that year. None of them were on Hokkaido. But, by 2004, the north island’s resorts were also closing en mass, and by 2008, at least 17 of Hokkaido’s ski resorts were out of business.

I find myself in one of these casualties of the ski bust in Daisetsuzan National Park. After skiing up high on Tokachidake, Iz, Mike and I drop into the shelter of the trees. We link hallways for a while, schwacking in the thick groves between the openings. We even spot a snow-white hare hiding in a tree well. Then, we pop onto a path so wide and evenly graded that it can only be an old ski trail.

I later learn from Lea’s site that it’s Kokusetsu Tokachidake. After opening in 1970, then closing in 1988 due to Tokachidake’s eruption, the resort reopened in 1993 only to be permanently closed three years later, making it an early victim of the ski bust.

We lap one of the steeper pitches above an onsen and watch as a group of school children take turns sledding into the parking lot below. With the constant snowfall, views of the high peaks and access to the nearby onsen, the fact that this place went out of

[Top, Left] The original Ryounkaku was a high-altitude haven for backcountry skiers during the 1980s ski boom.

[Bottom, Left] Before being taken out in 1999, Kokusetsu Tokachidake’s ski lifts topped out at 4,330 feet. **John Morrel, both photos**

[Right] Betsy Manero skis the deepest snow of her life. According to Niseko Mountain Guides owner Tracy Leonard, this was one of his top five days of skiing. **Iz La Motte**

[Left] Katie Botwin, Drew Zieff, Mike Parri and Jed Doane work their way back to the Ryounkaku, which was rebuilt to have more rooms in the '90s. 📷 **Iz La Motte**

[Facing Page, Left] "I will never forget the starkly beautiful form of Rishiri, silhouetted against the evening sky," Fukada writes in *One Hundred Mountains of Japan.*

[Facing Page, Right] Carston Oliver basks between sunshine and cornices on Mount Rishiri before clouds closed in and forced the party to descend. 📷 **Mary McIntyre, both photos**

business is a testament to how harshly Hokkaido was hit. I can picture myself spending a week staying right at the base of this resort, using the lifts to access the worldclass backcountry skiing we found up high.

Eventually, our legs are weary, and the sun is setting. Kokusetsu Tokachidake's two lifts and flood lights were removed in 1999, meaning that we have a long, dark skin ahead of us to get back to the Ryounkaku where we started this morning. We abandon the open field and point our skis upwards. It's going to snow again tonight, and, after almost 5,000 feet of touring, we're going to need an onsen and a hot meal to refresh for another day in powder paradise.

POWDER PARADISE

2000-Present

INBOUND TOURISM

Japan's ski conditions are world renowned for a reason. In the winter, cold air blows out of Siberia and into the Sea of Japan, where the wind collides with the warmer Tsushima Current from the south and the freezing Liman Current from the north. Water evaporates, creating additional moisture in the air. The result is a cloud filled with low-density snow, which will then travel 250 miles across the sea before dropping feet of powder on Hokkaido.

That's the exact type of storm system that brought over 3 feet of snow to Kiroro Snow World, west of Sapporo, over the past several days. Tracy Leonard, owner of Niseko Mountain Guides, leads Iz and I through the lift-accessed backcountry outside of the resort. After a short skin to gain the highest ridge, he drops first and completely disappears in a wave of white.

The snow stays suspended in the air as Tracy carves through it. When it's my turn to follow his tracks, I'm grateful that he chose an open slope without trees. I'm completely blinded with every turn and don't come up for air until I reach his stopping point.

Best of all, we're totally alone. While the resort was bustling with tourists—both Japanese and foreign—this secluded backcountry zone is empty. Tracy first moved to Japan over 20 years ago. As a Japanese permanent resident and a longtime local ski guide, he knows the mountains of Hokkaido better than perhaps any other American-born guide coming to the area. It's no wonder that when I started reaching out to friends who have worked on Hokkaido, all of them insisted we find a way to ski with Tracy for a day.

We continue lapping our private ski zone, spotting a few other parties from afar but never overlapping with them. I manage to not cross a single track all day.

When it's time to re-enter the resort, we dodge people all the way back to our car. It's a stark contrast to the Kiroro I visited on my first trip to Japan in 2020. Less upscale, quieter, fewer foreign visitors. Parking was never an issue, but today, we're down in the third lot despite getting there right when the resort opened. We cross under a gondola and the Club Med logo. The French luxury tourism company purchased Kiroro in 2021.

Kiroro is one of many ski resorts either owned by foreign investment groups or catering to foreign tourists. In 2004, one of the Niseko United resorts, Hanazono, was bought by Nihon Harmony, an Australian company. (It's now owned by Hong Kong company Pacific Century Premium Developments.) This coincided with an influx of tourists from down under. While the Aussies were the first noticeable group of foreigners, they were hardly the last. Americans, Canadians, Europeans and visitors from other Asian countries are all common.

Hokkaido tourism has steadily grown over the past decade. According to the Japanese National Tourism Organization, 1.5 million foreigners traveled to the north island in 2011. There was a steady increase until 2019, when foreign visitor numbers peaked at just under 8 million before Japan began restricting travel during the pandemic. In 2023, Hokkaido's tourism industry rebounded with over 6 million foreign visitors, making solitary days like ours with Tracy a growing rarity.

RESPONSIBLE RECREATION

Hokkaido's popularity as a ski destination runs parallel with another growing trend: backcountry skiing. Many visitors seeking powder turns aren't just doing it at the resort anymore. Some go it alone. Others hire guides. While both options can (and are) done responsibly, there are also pitfalls. Namely, a lack of information available for visiting backcountry skiers.

"Current challenges at Hokkaido's backcountry includes avalanche information, parking issues and an increase in skiers," says Daisuke Sasaki. Born outside of Sapporo in 1977, he remembers skiing everyday growing up. Eventually, it became his livelihood, first as a professional big mountain skier and later as an internationally certified mountain guide. His career has taken him all over the world. He's won big mountain competitions, completed first descents and guides international ski trips, but he keeps coming back to Hokkaido. He tells me that it's busier now than it was when he was young, mostly due to foreign tourists, but that it's not necessarily bad. It just needs to be managed properly.

RISHIRI: THE WINDY ISLAND

MARY MCINTYRE

As we drove north through the snowy foothills and small towns of Hokkaido, the landscape slowly changed, becoming barren and empty compared to the island's interior powder paradise we'd explored over the past week. Five hours on winding roads from Hokkaido's capital of Sapporo is Wakkanai, a grey-scale, industrial frontier town on the northernmost tip of Japan's second-largest island. Road signs switch from Japanese to Russian, reminding us we're essentially at the border. It feels like a working town, not a place people come in search of fun. It's a bleak contrast to the urban, neon-lit metropolises of Tokyo and Sapporo. Locals look more surprised and confused to see us scout for a lunch spot than elsewhere in Hokkaido, where powder-chasing foreigners have become a familiar sight. But luckily, this isn't our final destination. Across the sea of windblown waves, a snow-capped mountain rises straight out of the water like an illusion. Rishiri. An island I'd dreamed of visiting for years.

Aboard the huge, nearly empty car-ferry and motoring across the Sea of Japan, the classic cone-shaped volcanic peak loomed large through the small round windows. I periodically pulled my eyes from the topographic map brought along by our Japanese friend and guide Makoto as two hours slowly ticked by. Excitement was building among our small group as Rishiri's snowy ridgelines began to take form out of its initial shadowy silhouette. We held hopeful visions of a perfect summit day on the stunning 5,646-foot peak as we traced different routes along the map's contour lines.

The indigenous Ainu people called this place Rera Moshiri or Windy Mountain, and as Makoto shepherded us around the nearly circular island, we quickly learned the wind-management game. Every morning, check wind direction and speed. Then, drive accordingly to a trailhead on the leeward side of that day's gusts. In stark contrast to other places I've skied on Hokkaido and Honshu, where sometimes we return to the same trailhead day after day for a week, here, it was a new valley each day. It kept us constantly assessing terrain and avalanche hazards and in awe of how much skiing this single peak could provide. And one day when 80-mile-per-hour winds were forecasted? It sent us on a tour of the island's ramen and udon shops.

Rishiri is currently home to just over 5,000 people living in small towns tucked along the narrow plateau encircling the mountain's base. Half a century ago, the island supported nearly 20,000 residents who came to fish the abundant herring stock, but overfishing has led to steady population decline. The majority of the island's 71 square miles are made up of forested foothills and wild valleys winding towards the summit massif.

We drove halfway around the island on our first morning, past ghost towns of abandoned wood-framed houses, parking next to the boulder-strewn shoreline. Our skintrack weaved through a dense birch forest before climbing above treeline with vast ocean views. From the crest of a sub-peak, we gazed across the sea to Russia and then up, past fluted snowy spires, to the summit. We weren't on the usual summit route, but for a moment my heart pounded faster, wondering if we could make it. My daydream was cut short as clouds suddenly swirled over the ridge and swallowed the coal-black cliffs to our south in seconds. Soon, I could barely see my own feet. Skiing down the steep, lava-formed gully through the vertiginous soup made our group of professional skiers look like beginners. As we emerged from the clouds and could open up our turns, my legs burned from the endless descent to the ocean after several long days of traveling.

We endured a few days of icy, rock-dodging survival skiing (we learned it was the lowest snow year on the island in a decade) before a local friend offered to show us his favorite haunt. A long approach brought us into a deep valley. Huge ski lines held soft snow, unlike anywhere else on the island, with couloirs slicing between rock faces. The frosted summit towered above it all. The rest of the day flew by in a blur of yo-yo laps as the clouds came in and out. As evening approached, the clouds returned, but shared the sky with the sun, thick snow creating a perfect snow globe of glittering air.

After that magical day, the weather deteriorated. Without a forecasted clearing, we made one last attempt to summit via a two-night campout in the mountain's emergency hut. We skinned towards the volcano's eerie ice-encrusted upper reaches under swirling clouds. The hut itself was nearly invisible, walls encased in long spindles of rime ice, snow piled above the roof. We spent two nights in the frigid shelter hoping for a break in the storm. We were so close to the summit—an easy walk in good weather—but the raging winds kept us huddled inside. On our last morning, light streaked the mountain with shades of rose and orange while the gale howled harder than ever before. The summit was momentarily visible, but in the end, we knew striking upwards towards the peak would be foolish. We packed our bags with frozen fingers and made the windy journey down to town, the summit once again obscured by clouds.

It was disappointing to turn back, knowing all that it took to get to this faraway corner of the world. But there was so much of Rishiri that we did get to enjoy beyond the summit: being offered fresh catch by smiling fishermen at the docks, meeting kind and caring restaurant owners, chatting with people of all ages and backgrounds in the community-filled onsen, and exploring the wild nooks and crannies of the incredible mountain. When we talked to Makoto about his guiding season ahead, it seemed that backcountry skiing might be the new herring rush for this cold, windy island. The growing interest may be enough to motivate some young people to stay on and become guides, creating more incentives to celebrate and protect the island's unique geography and community. Although we didn't achieve our summit goal, the trip revealed a glimpse of the many secrets this wild island holds for those willing to step off the beaten path.

[Above] In a quiet corner of Niseko, the Alpenglow Ginkei offers cold beer, warm breakfast and a little slice of history. ◘ **Iz La Motte**

[Right] Niseko Weiss Ski Area was a casualty of the ski bust. It now hosts a cat skiing operation and is being eyed by nearby Hanazono Resort for an expansion. Akiko Irie, Taka Shinohara and Nobuko Masuda enjoy the early morning silence. ◘ **Brendan Reeves**

Sasaki's a key part of a group that worked with the Hokkaido District Transportation Bureau to launch a new initiative to educate visiting backcountry skiers. Hokkaido Backcountry Information, which can be found at HokkaidoBC.info, was created as a resource for English-speaking visitors. Web cams, weather and avalanche resources and even parking information for some popular trailheads are all listed on the site. Users are also encouraged to submit a backcountry plan with the police department, and the Hokkaido Backcountry Information group is staging at popular trailheads throughout the winter to survey foreign visitors heading into the backcountry.

New Zealander, Sapporo resident and Hokusei Gakuen University professor Rob Thomson has also been working with Sasaki and the Transportation District on this project. "Understanding in terms of foreigners, who's going in and how prepared are they, and that kind of thing, the government's throwing their weight behind understanding that," says Thomson.

His site, HokkaidoWilds.org, is one of the resources linked on HokkaidoBC.info. It's an English-language guide with articles ranging from the history of huts on Hokkaido to information about which two-way radios are illegal in Japan, how to hire a qualified guide and what myths about skiing on Hokkaido can get you in trouble. Thomson even made a map of backcountry areas around Niseko with some of this information on it.

"Hokkaido is booming, and it's in those early stages of growth pains and understanding how to manage this," says Thomson.

THE POTATO REPUBLIC

The lights of the Alpenglow Ginkei cut through a late-night storm like a beacon welcoming Iz and I home. After arriving later than planned to Sapporo, we spent the last two hours white knuckling our way through a blizzard to Niseko. But this neighborhood isn't the hopping ski town I've been told Niseko is.

At the base of the Annupuri International Ski Area, the western most of the Niseko United resorts, is a cluster of mismatched wooden buildings, all of which sport smoking chimneys and snow-covered, slanting roofs. No concrete or neon lights can be seen. The Alpenglow Ginkei is tucked away behind Gate Zero Taproom and the Milky Bar. It's quiet, more like the woods of New Hampshire I grew up in than the hustle of an international ski resort.

The Ginkei was built over 40 years ago, and, according to the current owner, Evan Thomas, the tables in the upstairs common area and beds in the cozy basement rooms were all built by the original owner. It's clean and comfortable, but it has a rustic charm, like stepping back into the days just before the ski boom of the 1980s.

For dinner one night, we wander over to Gate Zero Taproom. It's a recent addition to Lodge Negula, which was built in the same era as the Ginkei. A woodstove heats the bar and provides some additional light at our corner table, which is a bisected ring of a massive tree.

After dinner, the owner of the taproom, Jun Doi, is working behind the bar. He tells us about their beers and asks if we skied that day. After a few minutes, it comes out that Iz and I are here for a story. "Well, you need to learn about the Potato Republic," he says before running back into the kitchen. A few minutes later, he comes out with Lodge Negula owner Wataru Miyazaki, who grew up in this very building.

In the early '80s, Miyazaki's father moved from Tokyo to the base of Niseko Annupuri and built Lodge Negula. In the winter, they hosted skiers. In the summers, the owners of the nearby lodges dug wild spring vegetables in the mountains, which were brought to Sapporo and given away with a pamphlet inviting guests to stay in their little corner of paradise.

In 1984, the hamlet declared themselves the Republic of the Potato, an independent nation that welcomed counter-culture adventurers looking to live closer to nature. The first potato president was elected and bestowed with a curved staff, which was passed to the next president every year. A bell marking their republic was placed near the Milky Bar.

During the ski boom, the rest of Niseko grew around the little Potato Republic. Developers came. Massive, concrete hotels and sprawling condo complexes were built, but the residents at the base of Niseko Annupuri continued to pass the staff to the next president.

At some point, the bell was lost, and the staff was hung up. As Hokkaido's tourism numbers grew, so did the pressure for holdouts like the Alpenglow Ginkei and Lodge Negula to sell.

In 2023, Thomas, Miyazaki and the other owners of the original Potato Republic lodges met to talk about the future of their quiet corner. The question was to sell or hold? Their answer: find the staff and the bell and work towards bringing back the Republic. Miyazaki and Doi all tell me that the owners agreed to hold onto their businesses.

Thomas echoes the sentiment and points us in the direction of the presidential staff. Iz and I find it above the stairs leading down to the Alpenglow Ginkei's basement. The curved shepherd's cane is polished and bears the original engravings, though many have been worn down by former presidents' hands.

When we settle into the threadbare couches around the cone-shaped woodstove of the Alpenglow's common area, we aren't alone. An Australian family shares stories from their best run of the day while the lodge's chef, Saito Ryuto's, daughter steals my notebook and pen to draw. I'll later read my notes on the Potato Republic through her scribbles.

It's a welcoming place, and it's a stark contrast to the flashy resort town just down the road. Every local I've skied with has told me that yes, Hokkaido is busier every year. The tourism numbers back up the claim. But it's also a big island, and Iz and I have only visited a few places on it. If our hosts like Yuki, Tracy and Diana have taught us anything, it's that those who live here know how to find fresh powder turns and quiet places. ❆

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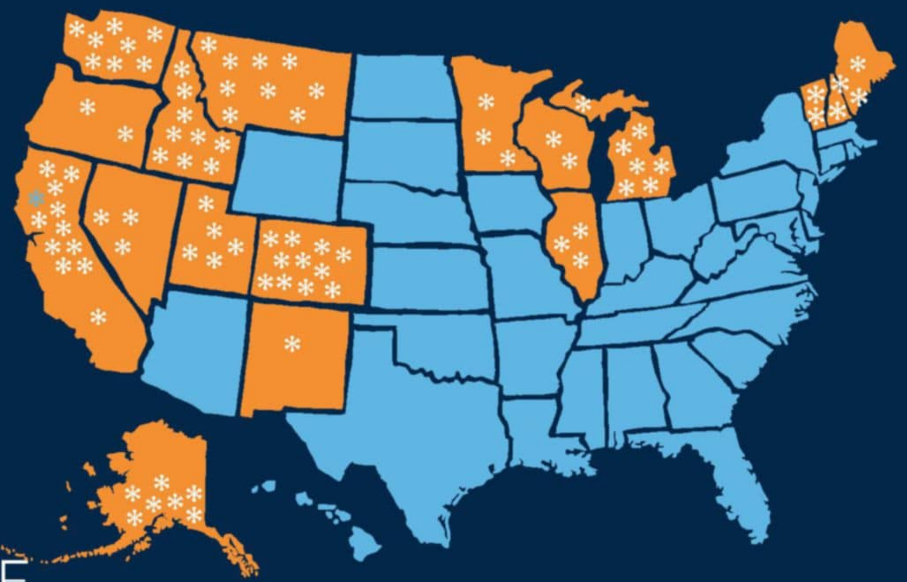

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Forecasts Down Under

After moving to Sydney, Australia, Craig Sheppard found an unlikely outlet for his abundance of snow safety expertise: managing the Mountain Safety Collective.

by Kevin Hjertaas

Craig Sheppard where he's happiest: in snowy mountains.
Courtesy Craig Sheppard

On one side of our blue planet, skiers and snowboarders are kept awake on summer nights with visions of deep powder in the mythical white birch of Japan or the old-growth fir of central British Columbia. On the other side of the planet, it's a winter's day, and if Ullr has turned his benevolent snow horn south, giddy powder pigs might be sliding through Australia's snow gum trees. The smooth bark, akimbo limbs and twisted trunks of the Eucalyptus Pauciflora leave plenty of space under their canopy for carving turns, but deep days are rare.

The snow gums grow in cooler areas above 2,300 feet, across New South Wales and into Victoria, which is also the slice of Australia where you'll find some backcountry skiing potential. And it's where Craig Sheppard, a Canadian avalanche professional and guide whose resume could earn him work from B.C. to Japan, lives—to the astonishment of his peers and would-be employers.

Born in Ontario, Canada, Sheppard spent most of his childhood moving around the flat province. He was introduced to skiing at eastern resorts, and even before he finished his degree in Psychology at the University of Windsor, he knew he'd be moving west after graduation.

In the winter of 1995/96 Sheppard landed in Lake Louise, Alberta, where he found work in "outdoor customer service," which included everything >>

> *Now, with Sheppard at the helm, the non-profit produces Australia's only daily mountain hazard bulletins.*

from shoveling to parking cars and picking up garbage. By 2000, he was on the ski patrol team, then snow safety a few years later. He became the Head Forecaster and Snow Safety Supervisor in 2012, a job he held for the next three years. During his time at Louise, Sheppard taught recreational and professional avalanche courses and took his Apprentice Ski Guide course. The opportunity was there to leave the ski resort and guide or teach full-time, but he'd met an Australian ski instructor named Jane, and as they fell in love, then married and dreamt of having kids, the steady local work became more and more appealing.

As their son, Kai, and daughter, Nina, grew, the Sheppards found themselves visiting Jane's family in Australia more often. In 2019, the pull of family won, and the Sheppards moved to Sydney. The city's traffic and busy beaches are a literal world away from the mountains that shaped Sheppard, but he tried to embrace the new lifestyle. He enrolled in business classes at the University of Sydney and earned his Master of Commerce degree. But much like during his undergrad studies, the mountains tugged at him.

The Australian Alps rise as high as 7,000 feet above the Antarctic Ocean, which in turn, builds and spins intense weather right at them. Like anywhere else in the world, the combination of mountains and heavy precipitation draws skiers and snowboarders, but the extreme storms that batter those mountains can have deadly consequences for the people enjoying them.

While Sheppard was grinding though his master's, a movement was afoot down under to foster a greater attitude of safety among backcountry winter travelers. "When I first started coming over here, 15 to 20 years ago, I talked to shops, and the conversation was, 'There's no such thing as avalanches here. You don't need that sort of gear.' It was an 'everything's fine' attitude and, 'She'll be right.' But then, looking at a map, I'd see a hut there and ask them about it, 'Oh, no. That hut got taken out by an avalanche,'" he recalls.

That hut was the Australian Alpine Club's Mount Kunama Hut, which was destroyed by an avalanche way back in 1956, killing an 18-year-old woman. On August 18, 2008, near Mount Kosciuszko, a 22-year-old man was buried meters deep by a cornice-triggered avalanche and died. And finally, on July 10, 2014, two experienced backcountry snowboarders, **>>**

Sheppard leads a tour up Dead Horse Gap near Australia's Thredbo Resort. **Matt Wiseman**

It's not quite the Canadian Rockies but skiing amongst snow gum trees has its own charm. Sheppard enjoys a rare Australian powder day in a popular backcountry zone near Thredbo Resort. ◘ **Matt Wiseman**

Daniel Kerr, 32, and Martin Buckland, 33, died in an avalanche on Mount Bogong. Compared to other ranges around the world, it's a relatively small number of fatal incidents. But coupled with the 14 other backcountry rescues that year, the tragedies weighed heavily on Australia's mountain community.

So in 2015, graphic designer and backcountry enthusiast Simon Murray started the Mountain Safety Collective (MSC). At first, it was simply a way for a small group of recreational backcountry travelers to exchange notes on conditions. But as backcountry recreation grew, so did MSC. It was clear the organization needed to find someone qualified to write bulletins, educate people about backcountry safety and run the growing operation. In 2020, to everyone's surprise, MSC found their man sitting in downtown Sydney. Sheppard was happy to put his skills to work and get back in the mountains, so the family moved up to Jindabyne, a tiny town on the edge of the Snowy Mountains, and he took over as MSC's President and Program Director. Now, with Sheppard at the helm, the non-profit produces Australia's only daily mountain hazard bulletins, advocates for backcountry safety and establishes avalanche rescue training sites.

Sheppard's friends and peers were pleasantly surprised that he found such a unique gig. "He moved to Australia for family, not for skiing," says Geoff Osler, a mountain guide and former Lake Louise avalanche tech. "So, it's great that he's found a way to apply his deep understanding of snow in a different part of the world."

One of Sheppard's main jobs is overseeing the team that collects information for and writes the daily Backcountry Conditions Report for two separate regions in the Australian Alps: North East Victoria in Victorian Alpine National Park and Main Range New South Wales (NSW) in Kosciuszko National Park. Backcountry travelers from North America will recognize much of the MSC's daily report contents. Other parts? Not as much. "It isn't just an avalanche service. It's kind of a holistic approach, and our reports look at avalanche hazard when it's there but also look at the surface conditions and weather conditions," Sheppard says.

As the MSC website explains, "Our service acknowledges that although elsewhere in the world avalanche is a primary hazard of concern, here in Australia this is not the case. Exposure, visibility, surface conditions and avalanches should all be considered for successful decision making." In 2024, there were only eight reported avalanches in NSW and three in Victoria. There were, however, many days when the mountains were coated in ice, creating what Sheppard calls "the slide for life" hazard. Or days when the southern ocean's frequent storms shrouded the slopes in unnavigable whiteouts.

As an example, the NSW report from Aug. 31, 2024, reads, "Travel is not recommended today due to ongoing damaging winds, rain, and potential snow above 1400m. Whiteout conditions in the alpine and poor visibility in the subalpine."

Their graphic shows alpine and subalpine only, because there is no broad treeline band like there is in North America. On that day, the alpine was red with "Travel Not Recommended," while the subalpine was green with "Extra Caution." Where North American bulletins would break the conditions down by avalanche problems, the MSC tallies up the hazards to get those travel recommendations. Weather conditions are rated from favorable to blizzard, visibility from good to whiteout, avalanche conditions from low to high and surface conditions are added to that when shallow coverage or "Widespread Ice Danger" exist.

"The situation here in Australia is fairly unique," Sheppard explains. Statistically, in the Australian mountains, critical hypothermia is the most significant danger, followed by injury due to uncontrolled slides. Avalanches, though the deadliest, are the least likely. So a lot of backcountry safety comes down to watching weather models and mapping out the various surface crusts that form. Every mountain range has its own local snow vocabulary. In Lake Louise, avy techs talk about wind-sifted, wind-pressed and windloaded snow. In Australia, Sheppard had to learn the nuances of ice formations. "We get rime crusts, cauliflower crusts, all kinds of rain and sun crusts. Often our field days are traveling around mapping crusts. Not digging too many snow profiles."

Those aren't the kind of conditions that should inspire people to take up the sport, but Aussies love skiing. A study funded by Club Med found that 51% of Australians have skied. Crazy, right? And over half of them have skied overseas. Fifty percent of 18- to 30-year-olds say they prefer having fun in the snow over going to a warm destination—the grass is always greener, eh? Less surprisingly, five in six Australian skiers are tired of skiing in Australia, which is why you find so many of them in every ski town around the world.

During the Australian summer of 2025, Sheppard, too, will travel for powder. He and the family are flying to Japan for some skiing and sightseeing before Sheppard starts a month or two of guiding there. During their 2025 winter, he'll be back at MSC forecasting, teaching and watching weather models. Sheppard will be looking for that perfect Australian storm that begins with a low spinning clockwise—like the toilets down under—somewhere off Antarctica, then arrives with prefrontal rain which will soften the existing crust. If, fingers crossed, temperatures cool, that precipitation will turn to snow.

"Then we hope for the unicorn storm which does all that with only light winds," Sheppard says. ❄

FOLKRM
WYEAST SKI POLES

"I'm a convert to fixed-length, extended-grip poles now," said our tester who has been putting Folkrm's Wyeast poles to the test in their home territory: the Pacific Northwest. She scored these poles high for their light weight (8 ounces at 115 centimeters), sturdy feel and the convenience of never needing to adjust the height. "I just love how natural it feels to choke up when I need to and that I don't have to readjust when I need more leverage to double pole up a short pitch," she explained. She also appreciated the flat, hard-plastic top of the grip which had a good lip for flipping heel risers. While she did have to reference a Folkrm YouTube video to learn how to remove the pole straps, everything else was intuitive to set up and use.

FOLKRM.COM | $120

ATOMIC
BACKLAND FR

While all the other ski brands are playing checkers with their pole designs, Atomic is playing chess. Inside the Backland FR poles are a flat and Phillips-head screwdriver, easily accessible by pulling the two adjustable pieces apart. "It's a necessary part of every repair kit. Why not save some space by adding them to your poles?" said our tester. She used them several times, adjusting a din or a binding and even tightening the locking mechanism on the poles. As for their performance as a pole, not a screwdriver, she was impressed with the swing weight and the easily removable straps. "I love the oversized powder baskets. Perfect for deep-snow touring," she added. Her only complaint was the lack of a long grip to choke up on.

ATOMIC.COM | $130

BLACKCROWS
DUOS FREEBIRD

Even swing weight? Check. Long grip? Check. Massive powder basket? Check. The Duos Freebird included all our tester's favorite features and more. "Being able to choke up made side hilling easy," he said. "They're not the lightest, but also definitely not too heavy to tour with." As a ski guide, he appreciated the durability. The locking mechanism was solid, and he never felt any flex during his pole plants. As a former freeride athlete, he appreciated the steezy design that Blackcrows is known for. His only complaint was the lack of a true grip on the top of the pole. When skiing without pole straps in the backcountry, his hands slipped down the grip. In the resort with his straps, he didn't notice the same issue.

BLACK-CROWS.COM | $194

LEKI
GUIDE LITE 2 CARBON

The Guide Lite 2 Carbon isn't a standard ski pole. "Half baskets and pointy, directional tips—reminiscent of Nordic racing—work well in hardpack and while sidehilling," our tester said. The pole maintains ski touring chops with a dual shaft (aluminum up top and a carbon lower) and an easy locking mechanism, blending light weight and durability. "I crashed on it a few times, double-poled half a mile of flat road and it held up to the abuse," our tester confirmed. He was impressed with an even swing weight but complained the grip was ever-so-slightly too big in diameter. He also noted, "$200 is a lot for an average skier to spend on a pair of poles."

LEKIUSA.COM | $200

EDITORS CHOICE
folkrm
ATOMIC
LEKI

EDITORS CHOICE
tour

CONTOUR SKINS
HYBRID PURE

From ice to pow, our tester found Contour's Hybrid Pure skins were up to the task of sticking to the skintrack all day long. Made from 100% mohair—thank you Angora goats—the hybrid designation refers to Contour's adhesive technology which uses two separate layers, one to adhere the skin to the ski and a second which permanently adheres the mohair to the adhesive layer. "The ease with which I was able to unstick the skins from each other, from day one, made transitions so much easier," said our tester. She was pleased by the Hybrid Pure's consistent grip on a tight, steep skinner riddled with kickturns and commended their short haircut for smooth speed on the climb. "The contour line pattern is a sweet bonus, too," she added.

CAMP.IT | $240-260

BIG SKY MOUNTAIN PRODUCTS
ENDURANCE PRE-ASSEMBLED

After frostbite-inducing morning laps and beachy afternoon tours, our tester concluded the 65/35 mohair/nylon Endurance offered ample stick and glide in a lighter, trimmer package than their previous skins. He was most impressed with Big Sky Mountain Products' four-striped, self-renewing glue pattern, saying, "Stuck like my hand in the cookie jar even after being dropped in the snow and didn't require I summon the strength of Thor to pull apart." His complaints were twofold: the skins stuck too well to the bottom of his skis (although it never left an unwanted residue) for easy transitions, and the tail clip needed to be slid on from the side. Neither were a deal breaker: "I trust these will be a loyal servant for years to come."

SKISKINSONLINE.COM | $180-210

COLLTEX
VRENELI

"The Vreneli exceeded all expectations right from the first tour," our tester said after putting them to the test on a long, slick day out and powdery yo-yo laps. Thanks to Colltex's proprietary synthetic mohair, Profibre, she added, "The Vreneli is lighter comparatively and balances a strong grip with glide." Though, while the skins stuck reliably on the uptrack, she fell behind on the down skin. She was equally excited by the skin's smaller carbon footprint: per Colltex the Vreneli requires 50% fewer resources thanks to local production and fewer materials. "The tip and tail clips were easy to secure," she commented after transitioning multiple times in a tour. "The glue remained sticky and dry, likely because of the Drybase treatment." Her one qualm was how strongly they stick to themselves, saying, "It can be a two-person job to pull these apart."

COLLTEX.CH/EN | $215

mountainflow eco-wax
SKIN WAX

MOUNTAINFLOW ECO-WAX
RUB ON SKIN WAX

Made from a mixture of bees' wax and plant-based waxes, Mountainflow's Rub On Skin Wax lives up to its green color. As importantly, it works, per our tester, who said he "glided away from friends like nothing" on an unseasonably warm January day. He cut the 56-gram block of wax block in half and attested it preformed wonders when applied in the field. When the weather looked particularly beachy, he even applied some pre-tour wax to prevent snow globbing onto skins. After a weeklong spell above freezing, he confirmed Mountainflow's skin wax was, "One of those little things that makes your day a helluva lot better when you do need it."

MOUNTAINFLOW.COM | $16

BLACK DIAMOND EQUIPMENT

WOMEN'S COEFFICIENT LT HYBRID HOODY

At 12,000 feet, it's freezing in the shade and boiling hot in the sun. Our tester found herself passing through the different climes comfortably in the Coefficient LT Hybrid, which pairs PrimaLoft Active in the chest for a touch of insulation with Polartec Power Grid everywhere else for breathability. When it came time to rip skins, she simply threw her shell on over the hoody, noting that the wicking tech kept her cozy and dry. "It's a chameleon of insulation. I was never hot nor cold, no matter if I was moving or standing still, in the sun or the shade," said our tester. "It has me completely reevaluating my backcountry layering system." At just 205 grams, she deemed this the lightest, most versatile layer she owns.

BLACKDIAMONDEQUIPMENT.COM | $180

CEP

SKI MERINO TALL COMPRESSION SOCKS, WOMEN

Our tester wasn't quite sure what all the compression-sock rage was about, then she started skiing in CEP's merino ski socks. "The compression's effect was twofold: There's no sock wiggling in my boots and my legs feel good." After a little research, she learned that compression socks help improve blood flow. Though there are a lot of factors at play, she felt these 20-30 mmHG (firm) rated socks have helped her keep her legs fresh over the course of consecutive days and weeks of skinning and skiing. A blend of 58% polyamide, 32% merino wool and 10% spandex mean they have the elastic properties to squeeze, with some of the wicking power of wool, too. Said our tester, "They're a little tough to pull up, but once they're on, these socks are super comfy."

CEPCOMPRESSION.COM | $55

HELLY HANSEN

WOMEN'S ODIN LIGHTWEIGHT STRETCH INSULATOR VEST 2.0

To midlayer or not to midlayer on the skintrack? That is the question our tester, whose temperature frequently fluctuates, asks herself too often since moving to Washington's warm Cascades. Her conclusion: Helly Hansen's Odin vest. "My arms can dump heat, but my core doesn't get cold when I stop and my sweat cools," she enthused. PrimaLoft Active plus offers insulation while fleece panels on both sides enable heat and moisture to escape. "Waterproof and easy to pack," she added, pleased by the PFC-free DWR treatment and majority-recycled materials. Our tester did find that during high output, sweat from her back dampened the vest, but it was quick to dry. "Rarely leaving the parking lot without this in my pack," she summed up.

HELLYHANSEN.COM | $160

OUTDOOR RESEARCH

WOMEN'S SHADOW WIND HOODIE

Your shadow is always with you, and at under 150 grams, the Shadow Hoodie has found a permanent place in our tester's pack. The Bluesign nylon with a touch of spandex keeps out wind and some water while adding stretch to allow for movement on the uphill. When it's time to stow it away, the hoodie packs into its own chest pocket, which our tester noted also fit her cell phone for easy access. "I don't always tour in it, but it packs small enough to always carry it," she explained. As for the fit, she found it ran large and recommends sizing down. She added, "It's flattering, and I have yet to overheat in it."

OUTDOORRESEARCH.COM | $129

BIOLITE

DASH 450

This new headlamp's light weight (78 grams), affordability, rechargeable battery and, of course, capacity to illuminate impressed our tester. But what stood out most of all to her was the fit. "The Dash is free of the classic headlamp heft and clunkiness," she said. The low-profile design is thanks to BioLite's 3D Slimfit Construction: The bulbs sit up front while the battery, connected by electronics integrated directly into the elastic band, sits in the back. Featuring 450 lumens and four modes (white spot, white strobe, white flood and red flood), there's plenty of power packed into the small body. Her only concerns were that the lightweight construction didn't feel quite as durable and that the white spot setting, while bright, only lit a small area to ski within. Still, she said, "My new go-to headlamp for night laps."

BIOLITEENERGY.COM | $60

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GARMIN

FĒNIX 8 SOLAR 47MM

"This watch essentially replaces my phone," said our tester of Garmin's Fēnix 8 Solar after he used it to take phone calls, listen to music, pay for groceries and track sleep. Most importantly, once he figured out how to navigate the plethora of data screens, he called the Fēnix 8 a "one-stop shop for all the info you could ask for in the backcountry." Said shop includes an electronic compass, altimeter, topo map, pace (both vertical and mileage), heart rate and a backcountry ski mode that automatically switches between ascending, transitions and descending. Our tester noticed a reduced battery drain with the watch's solar charging capability, but he was skeptical of Garmin's claimed-28-day battery life. Still, he called this watch "a do-it-all outdoor machine."

GARMIN.COM | $1,100

TURTLE FUR

OFFGRID 5 PANEL

Not all touring hats are made equal, and after sampling a plethora of options, our tester settled on Turtle Fur's Offgrid 5 Panel as her favorite lid. "Not only is it cute, it's also functional," she said. A u-shaped piece of foam in the brim is stiff enough to hold its shape while still being malleable enough to get thrown in a pack and not permanently bend. The cap offers UPF 50+ protection from the sun, and the material wicks moisture, especially along a sweat band. "It dumped heat, protected me from the sun and stayed on my head. What more could you ask for in a hat?" our tester concluded.

TURTLEFUR.COM | $40

VOILÉ

VOILÉ STRAP ALUMINUM BUCKLE – 20 INCH

Our tester doesn't just carry one of these—she has seven in her pack and one on her pole at all times. "This might seem like overkill, but they don't take up much space and you never know when a Voilé Strap will make the difference," she explains. As a former ski guide, she's used them to build a makeshift rescue sled, fix both boots and bindings, attach skis to packs that lack ski carry straps and even hold a hat down on a windy day. While the 20-inch aluminum buckle is this tester's preferred model, the Voilé Strap is available in a variety of lengths, widths and buckle types. "Whatever one you prefer, never leave home without it (them)," our tester advised.

VOILE.COM | $8

KELTY
LOWDOWN COUCH

“Grab a beer and pop a squat, this is primo beach seating,” said our tester. While she appreciated the ample room and deluxe comfort, it was the packability that really impressed her. The couch weighs 20 pounds and cinches down to a manageable size thanks to its carry-wrap. She found the steel frame and 600D polyester fabric durable when tossed in the trunk with a pile of gear. The cupholders on each arm were a nice touch, too. “If you’re over 30, consider the regular height option,” said another, slightly older tester who tested Kelty’s Loveseat ($130). “You won't need to embarrass yourself by asking for help when it’s time to stand up.” Said tester also appreciated that the carrying case doubles as a dog pad.

KELTY.COM | $180

XTRATUF
WHEELHOUSE BOOT

After spending the last few years taking her standard Xtratuf 6-inch Ankle Deck Boots everywhere from the beach to the skintrack, our tester was excited to see the Wheelhouse included a few new upgrades. “Rubber boots make my feet sweat, but the breathable mesh insole has made a huge difference,” said our tester. She also discovered that the slightly thicker sole gave her a little extra clearance in mud and water and a pop of style. The snakeskin blue colorway didn’t hurt either. “Definitely a car to the bar and beyond shoe,” she said. Her only qualm was sizing: “I wish Xtratuf offered half sizes, because I feel like I’m swimming in an 8 (my normal size) but a 7 is a bit snug.”

XTRATUF.COM | $135

YETI
TUNDRA 65

Yeti claims the Tundra 65 can hold 77 cans sans ice. With ice, there’s still ample space for a 30 rack of your choice. “That’s plenty for an afternoon tailgate,” said our tester. Plus, she found the 16-inch height made for a great bench. For overnight camping trips, her perishables stayed cold for three days. Between the removable basket and the drain at the bottom, her food also stayed dry. “No disintegrating egg cartons or soggy veggies,” she proclaimed. As for durability, after two seasons of wear and tear, our tester saw minimal damage to the Tundra. If 65 liters sounds overkill, there are also 35- ($275) and 45-liter ($300) versions.

YETI.COM | $350

SIERRA NEVADA
HAZY LITTLE THING

Hazy IPA fans, this beer’s for you. “A perfect blend of bitterness, haze and hopped flavor,” said our tester who has developed a palette for well-crafted India Pale Ales after spending most of her life among Vermont’s craft breweries. Depending on your tolerance, 6.7% ABV might be a touch strong for a power hour at the resort but, our testers agreed, crack open one of these cold cans from your Yeti after a long day on the skintrack, post up in your Kelty couch, and you’ve got a beer you can really enjoy that doesn’t break the bank. What’s to enjoy? A blend of malts and hops and ale yeast, which, paired with less filtering offers that bold flavor associated with its cloudy appearance, attested to by our hazy fans. With 35 bitterness units, “this Hazy Little Thing won’t leave your face puckered but she’s still a proud IPA,” our Vermonter added. “And with 214 calories *and* 2.2 grams of protein, you could say it’s a recovery drink (well, if you add in some beer salt),” she joked.

SIERRANEVADA.COM | $13 (6 PACK, 12-OUNCE CANS)

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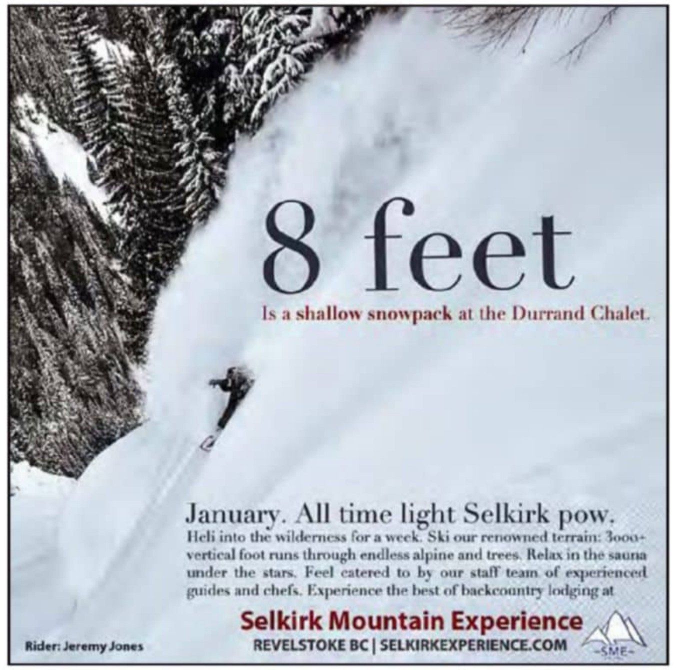
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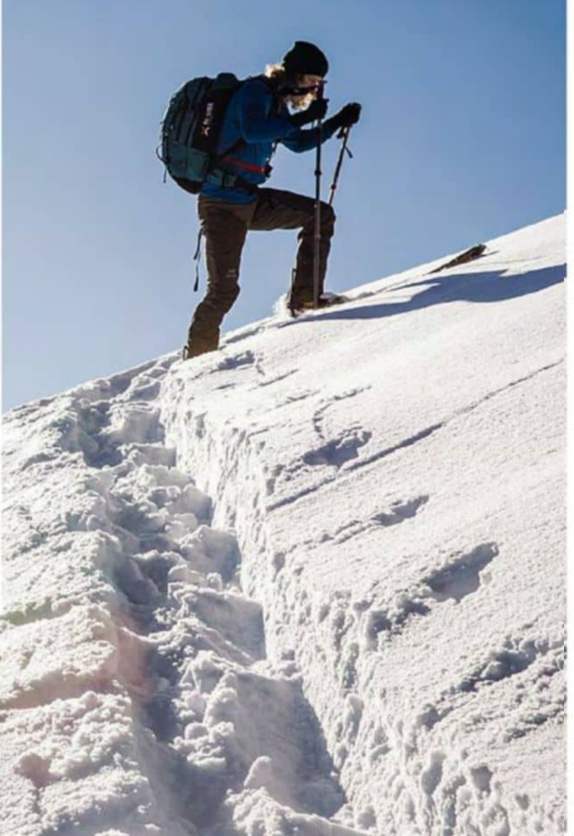

A Guy I Never Met

by Jeffrey Bergeron ~ illustration by Stephen Haynes

"Live fast, die young, leave a beautiful corpse."

In the mid '80s, I thought I was a backcountry skier; Doug-O was one. He came of age in the mountains when both he, and the fledgling ski resorts, were young. He had the Robert Redford vibe: blonde hair, blue eyes with a penchant for woolen sweaters and glacier glasses.

He was a former ski patrolman, and his partner of choice was a guy named Harry. By reputation, Doug-O and Harry were two of the best skiers—in bounds or out—in a county that had a lot of great skiers.

I knew Harry, fairly well, later in his life. We were on the same side of some social and political battles fighting for public access and opposing resort expansions. I never skied with him, but according to legend, he was still ripping it up inbounds in his late 70s when he only had one working lung.

I arrived in Colorado fresh from Boston in the mid '70s. Before moving west, my only experience of sliding on snow was bumper skitching (holding onto the back of moving vehicles down snow-covered roads) while whacked out on youth and Thunderbird wine. Those first few Colorado winters, I skied the resort well over a hundred days a season; and I still sucked.

Part of my reasoning to get into backcountry skiing was I could suck with less people watching. For me, backcountry skiing was using 210-centimeter skinny skis, leather boots, long poles and climbing to a high point on hiking trails or jeep roads, smoking a joint and trying to stay upright on the way down.

One such day, my buddy Scott took me to this old mining cabin, just below treeline. The place was in good shape and looked to be restored. Along with the ubiquitous Grateful Dead posters there were a bunch of photos nailed to the wall of two guys making beautiful turns off peaks and down couloirs; terrain that was so far over my head I'd need a snorkel. In one photo there was this guy standing in front of what looked like a thousand-foot run with perfect figure eights. They did all this with gear that would be laughable today.

"Who is that?" I asked.

"That's Doug-O," Scott replied. "He's dead."

That photo made an impression; I wanted to be like Doug-O, except for the dead part.

According to Scott, Doug and Harry had skied countless amazing lines during the '70s and early '80s until that day, when a slide in Saint John's Gulch took Doug out.

Doug-O was the first guy I knew who died in an avalanche. Even though I never met him.

My early days of backcountry skiing I hung with a fairly large posse. Most of them sucked as much as I did. Our crappy gear and lack of ability kept us safe from avalanches. Over the years, our skills and gear improved to a point where many of us were good enough to do stupid things.

A few years after Doug died, my two partners in what might have been the town's first backcountry-specific ski shop were killed. I was supposed to be with them that day, but the night before, I got distracted by a ski instructor who was open for suggestions and a poor judge of character. By the time I untied myself in the morning and could get to a phone, they had left. I was part of the group that dug out their bodies.

Since then, I would wager I knew, well or casually, more than a dozen folks who were killed by the sport we love.

The good news is that seems to have slowed down during the last several years. My guess is there are a few reasons for this.

Experience: If you have spent enough time off piste, and you want to live to get full value of your yearly Netflix subscription, you use your knowledge and experience to moderate your goals. But there are still many young bucks and buckettes pushing the envelope.

Gear: Transceivers, airbag packs, more folks wearing helmets and even body armor. Granted, no gear is a substitute for good decisions, but it can help (a little) to make up for bad ones. Doug and Harry carried only avy-cords and shovels.

Education: There are way more snow science courses and clinics available. Avy forecasting is a complicated science that take years to master but these clinics go a long way of reminding students of the risks and, hopefully, can teach caution.

And lastly, I think a magazine like *Backcountry* can take some credit. For 30 years this rag has entertained and educated off-piste sliders and riders. Before *Backcountry Magazine*, the only glossies on the rack catered to the upscale gravity skier, ignoring dirt balls like me.

"Live fast, die young, leave a beautiful corpse?" I would not recommend that. Because throwing caution to the wind can sometimes really blow.

Jeffrey Bergeron, under the alias of Biff America, can be read in several newspapers and magazines. He can be reached at biffbreck@yahoo.com. Biff's book, Mind, Body, Soul, *is available at local shops and bookstores or shop.holpublications.com.*

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